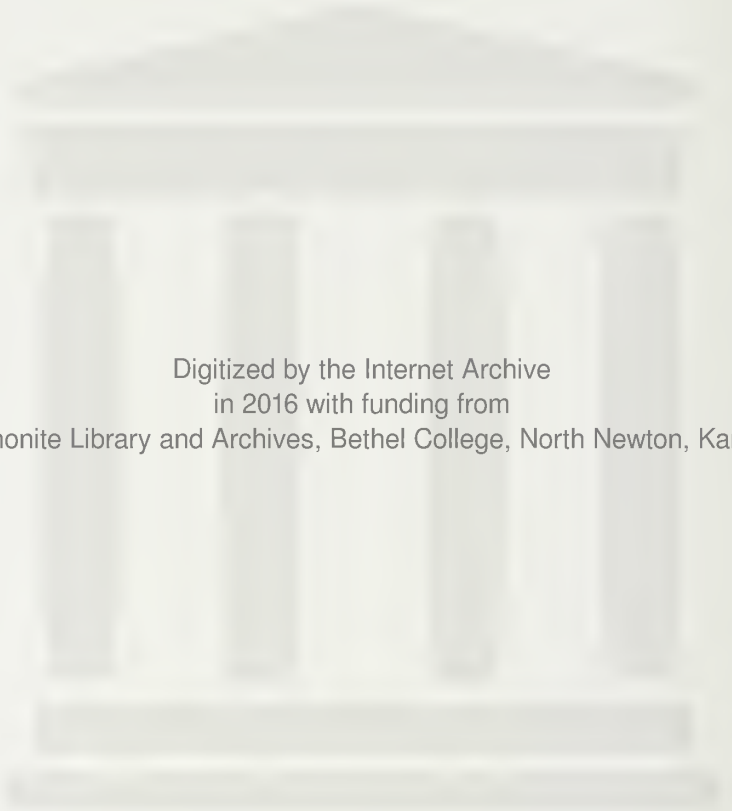
Menno Simons:

His Image and Message

by Sjouke Voolstra



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by Sjouke Voolstra

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Contents

Series Preface vii

Keith Sprunger *Introduction* ix

The Image of Menno Simons

1 The Art of Oblivion: Menno Simons in Dutch Mennonite Historiography 1

Menno Simons' Post-Sacramentalist Interpretation of Penance, Eucharist, and Baptism

2 The Anticlerical Priest: From Father Confessor to Lay Preacher of True Penitence 37

3 The Real Presence of Christ: The Congregation of True Penitents 59

4 The Longing for Perfection: The Segregation of the Saints of the Last Days 84

Index 105

Series Preface

Cornelius H. Wedel, the first president of Bethel College from the beginning of classes in 1893 until his death in 1910, was an early scholar of Anabaptist-Mennonite studies. His four volume survey of Mennonite history, published from 1900 to 1904, helped to rescue Anabaptism and Mennonitism from their marginal and denigrated portrayal in standard works of church history. Wedel saw Anabaptism and Mennonitism as part of a tradition of biblical faithfulness going back to the early church. He saw his people not in isolation but as a part of God's wider plan in world history.

The founders of Bethel College had a vision to promote the liberal arts through the cultivation of the intellect in all fields of knowledge and to serve the church through the preservation of Mennonite values and preparation for service. The 1994 college mission statement continues the commitment to "intellectual, cultural, and spiritual leadership for the church." The Cornelius H. Wedel Historical Series, initiated by the Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College as part of the college centennial celebration in 1987, hopes to further these goals by publishing research in Anabaptist and Mennonite history with a special emphasis on works with a connection to Bethel College, such as campus lecture series and projects based on the holdings of the Mennonite Library and Archives.

John D. Thiesen
Series Editor

Introduction

For Mennonites the year 1996 holds deep significance as the 500th anniversary of the birth of Menno Simons. This is the year of "Menno 500." The major church history lectureship at Bethel is called the *Menno Simons* lecutre; however, although it has dealth with many topics in Anabaptist-Mennonite studies, seldom has it been devoted specifically to the life and thought of Menno Simons. The last Menno Simons lectures devoted to Menno Simons were in 1961, when H. W. Meihuizen was lecturer. Now was obviously the time to return to Menno Simons. The lectureship committee chose the 1995 lectures as the opening of a celebrative and commemorative year in honor of Menno Simons 500.

The invitation went to Dr. Sjouke Voolstra, dean and professor of theology at the Mennonite Seminary of Amsterdam, the Netherlands; he is also professor at the University of Amsterdam. No one was more suited to deliver these commemorative, scholarly lectures about Menno Simons; and in every way they lived up to our expectations. The lectures occurred at Bethel College October 29-31, 1995. In conjunction with this special Menno Simons event, Bethel also sponsored an exhibit of Menno Simons portraits titled "In Search of Menno Simons."

Professor Voolstra's visit to Bethel College revived old ties between Amsterdam and Bethel College. In his opening lecture he gave tribute to Dr. Cornelius Krahn (1902-1990), long-time Bethel professor, for his pioneering Menno Simons research. For many years, Cornelius Krahn was a bridge between our two schools and churches, Dutch and American, as he traveled back and forth and linked the scholars of Menno Simons of the Old World and the New. Krahn's 1936 dissertation was *Menno Simons*, much of his research having been done in the Mennonite Library at Amsterdam. We look forward to this Amsterdam-Bethel tie to continue far into the future.

We are very pleased to present Professor Voolstra's Menno Simons lectures in printed form. There has been a great gap recently in writings about Menno Simons in the English language. This book highlights the latest scholarship about Menno Simons, his image and message, and makes it available in book form. Menno still speaks to us.

Keith L. Sprunger
Chairman, Menno Simons Lectureship Committee
Bethel College

Abbreviations

BLGNP, 1: *Biografisch Lexicon voor de Geschiedenis van het Nederlandse Protestantisme*, Deel 1. Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1983.

BRN, VII: *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica. (Geschriften uit den tijd der Hervorming in de Nderlanden, opnieuw uitgegeven en van inleidingen en aantekeningen voorzien door Dr. S. Cramer en Dr. F. Pijper)* Vol. VII: *Zestiende-eeuwsche schrijvers over de geschiedenis der oudste Doopsgezinden hier te lande*, bewerkt door Dr. S. Cramer. 's-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1910.

DAN, I: *Documenta Anabaptistica Neerlandica*, Vol. I: *Friesland en Groningen (1530-1550)* bewerkt door A. F. Mellink (*Kerkhistorische Bijdragen*, VI) Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975.

DAN, III: *Documenta Anabaptistica Neerlandica*, Vol. III: *Mikron, Een Waerachtigh Verhael der t'Zamensprekinghen tusschen Menno Simons ende Martinus Mikron van der Menschwerdinghe Iesu Christi (1556)* opnieuw uitgegeven en van een inleiding en aantekeningen voorzien door W. F. Dankbaar (*Kerkhistorische Bijdragen*, X) Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981.

DAN, V: *Documenta Anabaptistica Neerlandica*, Vol. V: *Amsterdam (1531-1536)* bewerkt door A. F. Mellink (*Kerkhistorische Bijdragen*, XII) Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985.

DB: *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* (1861-1908).

DB ns: *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen*, new series (1975-).

Complete Writings: *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons (c. 1496-1561)* translated from the Dutch by Leonard Verduin and edited by John Christian Wenger, with a biography by Harold S. Bender. Scottdale, Penna.: Herald Press, 1956.

Fundament: *Menno Simons, Dat Fundament des Christelycken Leers* [1539/1540] opnieuw uitgegeven en van een Engelse inleiding voorzien door H. W. Meihuizen. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967.

MQR: *The Mennonite Quarterly Review.*

Opera Omnia: *Opera Omnia Theologica, of alle de Godtgeleerde Wercken van Menno Symons.* Amsterdam: Joannes van Veen, 1681.

TAE, II: *Elsass*, II. Teil: *Stadt Strassburg 1533-1535* (*Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer*, VIII) Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1960.

Alles was von der vergangenen Menschheit besteht,
ist in den überlieferten Worten enthalten.

Elias Canetti

Illustration 1: Menno Simons. Silkscreen by Aizo Betten (b. 1938), Warffum, The Netherlands. Commissioned by the Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëteit on occasion of Menno Simons' quincentennial (1496-1996). The design is based on the engraving by Christoffel van Sichem (c. 1608). (Mennonite Library/University Library, Amsterdam).

The Image of Menno Simons

Chapter 1

The Art of Oblivion: Menno Simons in Dutch Mennonite Historiography

Menno Simons is someone from a distant past. Everything that remains of him is congealed in dead letters, and it is our task to exert the greatest possible empathy and receptivity to allow the message locked in the words to filter through to us. The perception of the messenger himself, however, remains vague and the contents of his message fragmentary, despite all these efforts. We are attempting to release time-congealed-in-writing, through our imagination, back into the stream of time which we ourselves are experiencing, and to give a voice to a past which is mute. But what we hear is more often our own confused stammerings than the unambiguous truth.

We human beings live together in fact and fantasy; in a physical reality *and* in a virtual reality. This is how we form our perception of people from the past and the present. We live with selective memories and change our memories, either consciously or unconsciously, until we can live with them. Ultimately, we ourselves are formed and changed to some degree by the image we construct of other people. In this way, we are the resultant of our experiences with others.

What perception have we formed of Menno Simons through the course of history? How reliable are the facts? To what extent are the interpretations products of their times? Is our perception of him a product of sympathy which is free of criticism, of unreasonable antipathy or of scientific detachment? Is the perception itself still part of the perception that his spiritual heirs have of themselves and wish to project to the outside world? Is Menno more commemorated in his land of origin than revered? Does the historiography which has taken him as its subject not sometimes appear to be more the art of oblivion than the art of remembering? What assumptions have determined the conceptualization of his person and the interpretation of his message? These are important questions when we come to make a critical sketch of the

development of the perception of Menno Simons in Dutch historiography.[1]

The first impartial summary of the information available on Menno Simons

The most important, earliest historian of the Reformation in the Netherlands was Gerard Brandt (1626-1685). He was a clockmaker originally, studied theology and was a Remonstrant minister in Nieuwkoop, Hoorn, and Amsterdam.[2] After producing various preliminary studies, he published the first part of his *Historie der Reformatie* in 1671.[3] Brandt set out here the national history of the church until the year 1600 in the form of a chronicle. Being a Remonstrant, he was a member of the moderate wing of the reformed church which had been condemned at the Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619) for its rejection of the Reformed doctrine of grace and predestination and which had organized itself as an independent religious community since 1619—initially in exile. The Remonstrants were a minority in the religiously pluriform society of the young Republic of the Seven United Provinces of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. Like the Catholics and the Mennonites, the Remonstrants were challenged in both the written and spoken word by the orthodox Reformed, the 'public church'. They were well able to remain steadfast, however, as a consequence of the tolerance of a liberal government which ensured that Calvinist zeal posed no threat to the economy, which was thriving, partly as a result of an important contribution from these same minorities.

If we call Brandt an impartial historian, this means specifically that he did not describe the development of the Reformation in the Netherlands from the perspective of the prevailing church—the

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[1]For historiographic reviews not confined exclusively to the Menno Simons research in the Netherlands, you are referred to Cornelius Krahn, 'Menno Simons Research (1910-1960)' in: Walter Klaassen, et al. eds., *No other Foundation. Commemorative Essays on Menno Simons* (North Newton, Kansas: Bethel College, 1962); Walter Klaassen, 'Menno Simons Research (1937-1986)', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, LX/4 (1986) 483-496; and idem, 'Menno Simons Research (1837-1937; 1986-1990)' in: Gerald R. Brunk, *Menno Simons; A Reappraisal. Essays in honor of Irvin B. Horst on the 450th Anniversary of the Fundamentboek* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Eastern Mennonite College, 1992) 181-197.

[2]*Biografisch lexicon voor de geschiedenis van het Nederlandse Protestantisme*, II (Kampen: Kok, 1983) (lemma: Brandt).

[3]G. Brandt, *Historie der Reformatie, en andere kerkelyke geschiedenissen, in en ontrent de Nederlanden* (Amsterdam, 1671; 1677[2]).

Calvinist Reformed Church. He sketched the national reformation as springing from the source of biblical humanism, where independent bible study and the incitement to a penitent life were considered more important than orthodoxy in doctrine. Brandt regarded the Remonstrants as the heirs of this national, biblical-humanistic tradition. This point of view was therefore not appreciated by either those in authority or the ministers of the Calvinist persuasion. After all, this was a painful reminder to them that Calvinism had been imported into the Netherlands and had only gradually gained in influence after the sixteen sixties. Calvinism was spread by the many refugees from the southern Netherlands, which was ruled by the Roman Catholic Habsburgs; and it started to function as the religious legitimacy for the armed revolt against the Spanish conquerors who fought every expression of reformatory inclination with fire and sword.[4]

Brandt's impartial approach meant that he gave ample consideration to the Anabaptists and the Mennonites who, in the eyes of the Reformed, were direct products of the revolutionary movements which could be adequately characterized by the words 'Müntzer' and 'Münster', despite their semblance of piety and defenselessness. They were not to be regarded as precursors of the Reformation, but were to be opposed as rivals of the true Calvinist religion. Brandt could not refrain from pointing out the alleged revolutionary descent of the Mennonites,[5] but he excused them by arguing that only a few Anabaptists had been overcome by zealotry and had incited revolt; the majority had taken no part in these excesses. These simple and defenseless folk had, however, been wrongfully lumped together with the zealots. In this way, the seventeenth-century Mennonites were taken under the protection of their Remonstrant kindred spirit against the accusations of their common Calvinist opponents.

When the Mennonites started—rather late admittedly—to tackle their own historiography in the eighteenth century, they were quite happy to concur with this interpretation. Making reference to their

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[4]The following recent publications offer a good insight into the motives and history of the Reformation and the revolt in the Netherlands: James D. Tracy, *Holland under Habsburg Rule (1506-1566). The Formation of a Body Politic* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1990); Alastair Duke, *Reformation and Revolt in the Low Countries* (London/Ronceverte: The Hambledon Press, 1990); *idem*, 'The Netherlands' in Andrew Pettegree, ed., *The Early Reformation in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and J. J. Woltjer, *Tussen vrijheidsstrijd en burgeroorlog* (Amsterdam: Balans, 1994).

[5]Brandt, *Historie der Reformatie*, 109-110.

alleged Waldensian origins, they disputed every connection between Dutch Anabaptism and the Zwickau prophets, Thomas Müntzer, Melchior Hoffman, Bernard Rothmann and the Münsterites. Free of foreign taints—German ones in this case—the Mennonites too started to present themselves as the representatives of the biblical-humanist national reformation, following in the footsteps of the Remonstrants. But we must not anticipate history. Let us first take a look at what Brandt had to say about Menno Simons more than a century after Menno's death.

Brandt on Menno Simons

The events which had taken place in the year 1539 were for Brandt the first reason to raise the subject of Menno Simons.[6] The fact was that in that year an Anabaptist was put to death by the sword in Leeuwarden for having sheltered Menno Simons in his house. Menno Simons had been a fugitive since 1536. The Anabaptist was Tiaert Renicxzoon (or Reynertszoon) from Kimswerd near Harlingen and Menno himself described him as 'a very pious and devout househusband', 'a fit knight of Christ'.[7]

This Menno Simons appeared more learned than the other Anabaptists.[8] He had been a priest in Pingjum first of all, the village where his father was born, and then in Witmarsum, the village where he himself had been born. He joined the defenseless Anabaptists after the Münster revolt, which he had seriously opposed and made every effort to purge the simple, misled folk from the stain of Münster, having been ordained an elder by Obbe Philips in order to accomplish this task. He persisted in his calling, even when Obbe Philips had renounced it. It could be said in praise of Menno that he had done his utmost, with a sincere and simple heart, to teach, to refute, to baptize, and to gather together a community isolated from other religious persuasions.

Less approving was Brandt's judgement of Menno's role in the disputes on church discipline. He had taken a middle course

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[6]*Ibidem*, 139-140.

[7]The sentence is contained in *DAN*, I, no. LXXVI. A. F. Mellink suggests, rather unconvincingly, in a note to the sentence that this Tiaert Renicxzoon can be identified with the revolutionary Frisian Anabaptist Thyaert 'with impudent and shrewd eyes' alias Tiardus Snekensis, mentioned by Jan van Batenburg. See *Opera Omnia* f. 234 for Menno's characterization of his host.

[8]We learn of this judgement of 'Memno [sic!] Phrysius' from the Polish cardinal Stanislaus Hosius (1504-1579) in his *Confutatio Prolegomena Brentii* (Antwerp; Joannes Steelsius, 1561) f. 12ro: 'qui caeteris eruditione praestare videtur'.

originally, but had allowed himself to be swayed by the advocates of strict church discipline. Menno's hesitant adoption of a stance in this question, particularly where the shunning of marriage partners was concerned, was discussed at length by Brandt in his account of the conflicts which arose on this subject from 1554 onwards.[9] Finally, Menno was blamed for an excessive fervor in the writings in which he refuted the beliefs of the Lutherans and Zwinglians. Menno too was only a man whose virtues were eclipsed by the fierceness of his zeal and severity towards others, but this is no way detracted from the fact that he had done a great deal for the reform of doctrine and morals. Thus, on the basis of the sources available to him, did Brandt summarize the general opinion of Menno Simons in the middle of the seventeenth century.

How impartial are Brandt's sources?

Brandt's documentation for his final judgement on Menno Simons was outstanding, as befits a good historian. But we must also ask ourselves to what extent the authors he consulted can be considered to have been just as impartial as the tolerant Remonstrant himself. We can distinguish three categories in the sources at his disposal—writings by Anabaptist insiders, and by Catholic and Reformed outsiders. Only two of the authors of writings consulted by Brandt had actually met Menno Simons in person; Obbe Philips, who had ordained him, and Martin Mikron, who was Reformed and had debated with him. In these sources, we encounter the most important themes which became decisive in forming opinions on Menno Simons' personality. Indecisiveness was ascribed to him, in view of his irresolute adoption of a stance regarding the Münster Anabaptists and church discipline. In this way, the historical process of Menno Simons' gradual transformation from Roman Catholic father confessor into evangelical penitent and Anabaptist leader was alluded to in psychological terms, yet little real clarity was expressed.

Anabaptist sources

In the first place, Brandt used writings by Anabaptist authors themselves, such as Menno Simons[10], Obbe Philips[11], I. H. V. P. N.

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[9]*Ibidem*, 178-186.

[10]Brandt took the autobiographical data from Menno Simons' account of his 'exodus from Popedom' in his *Beantwoordinge over een schrift Gellii Faber* [1554], a separate edition of which was at Brandt's disposal. No copies of this have survived however. The text has come down in part 1 of the first collection of Menno's

(the author of *Het Beginsel en voortganck der geschillen*)[12], Harmen Timmerman[13] and Pieter Jans Twisck.[14] And then he was mainly interested in information on two controversial questions—Menno's relationship with the revolutionary Anabaptists and his attitude in the conflict over correct discipline.

The reliability of Menno's autobiographical data is controversial, particularly regarding his relationship with the rebellious Anabaptists in his account of his "exodus from Popedom". It was more a question of his remaining silent about the truth rather than telling untruths. In addition, we definitely have to take the apologetic tendency of his autobiographical narrative into account. Obbe Philips had started to doubt the legitimacy of his ordination as elder by the apostles of Jan Matthijsz. at the end of 1535, and had drawn the obvious conclusion from this in 1540 by withdrawing as leader of the Anabaptist movement after Münster. Like Dirk Philips and David Joris, Menno had been appointed an elder by Obbe in 1536, and the legitimacy of Menno's calling also came under discussion as a result of Obbe's secession; now the chain of the Anabaptist apostolic succession had been broken. From that time on, Menno attributed his ordination to a direct call from God and kept silent about Obbe Philips' part in it. This also meant that he

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writings, to which Brandt also refers, *Sommarie Ofte By een vergaderinge van sommige schriftelijcke Bekentenissen des Gheloofs* (2 vols.; Hoorn, Jan Janszoon, 1600), and in later collections.

[11]Obbe Philipsz. *Bekentenisse . . . Waer mede hy verclaert, sijn Predickampt sonder wettelicke beroepinghe gebruyckt te hebben beclaecht hem dies, en waerschuwet eenen yeders wt sijnen eyghen boeck met eyghener Handt gheschreuen ghecopieert. Ende nu tot ghemeenen besten, door eenen liefhebber der Waerheydt in druck veruerdighet. Met eenen voorreden aen den onpartijdighen Lesers.* (Amsterdam, Corn. Claesz., 1584). Text with a preface republished in BRN, VII, 89-138.

[12]*Het beginsel en voortganck der geschillen, scheuringen, en verdeeltheden onder de gene die Doops-gesinden genoemt worden . . . tot op den jare 1615. Beschr. d. I. H. V. P. N. Ende nu d. J. K. J. H. D. K. F. in't licht gegeven. Hier is noch achter aen gevoeght een Extract uyt seecker Boeck, geschr. v. de Munstersche Oproermakers.* (Amsterdam: T. Houthaak, 1658). Republished with a preface in BRN, VII, 489-564. There is also a German edition: *Gründliche Historie v. denen Begebenheiten, Streitigkeiten u. Trennungen, so unter den Tauffgesinneten, od. Mennonisten . . . bisz aufs Jahr 1615.* Anfängl. v. J. H. V. P. N. in Holländ. Sprache beschr. Jetzund übers. v. J. C. Jehring, Zum Druck befördert u. m. ein. Vorr. versehen v. Io. F. Bvddeo. (Jena, [1720]).

[13]Harmen Timmerman, *Een verklaringhe: hoe en in wat manieren de Heere Jesus zijnen Jongeren in der af-zonderinge macht gegeven heeft, om die onbekeerige Overtreders zijnes goddelycken woort . . . hare sonden hier op aerden te binden* (s. l., 1560).

[14]*Chronijck vanden onderganc der tijrannen; ofte laerlyckscke geschiedenissen in werltlycke ende kercklijke saecken, van Christi geboorte af tot desen tyt toe . . . door Pieter Jansen Twisck.* (vol.1: Hoorn; Sacharias Cornelissen, 1619; vol.2: Hoorn: Isaac Willemsz., 1620).

did not have to answer for Obbe Philips' close involvement with the turbulent beginnings of the Anabaptist movement, particularly in Groningen.[15] But how reliable then is Obbe Philips' statement that for a long time there had been no one, apart from his brother Dirk, who had joined him in opposing insurgence and attacks?[16] These words have the same purport as Menno Simons' testimony that he had contradicted the Münsterites from the beginning. Both are confessions from men who had endorsed the Anabaptists' radical prophetic preaching of penitence until the moment when the followers of Jan Matthijs themselves started to fulfill their own prophecies of the coming judgement of the godless world, and sought the New Jerusalem in Münster.

If the reliability of Obbe Philips' *Bekentenisse* is not called into question, then only one conclusion is possible; the peaceful and revolutionary Anabaptists originally formed an explosive, apocalyptic amalgam which, during a painful and prolonged purification process after the fall of Münster, produced congregations which dissociated themselves from the reformatory plans inspired by the Münsterite leaders. Obbe only mentioned Menno once. It is from him that we hear what Menno himself wisely kept quiet, namely that he had been appointed to the office of elder by Obbe in the city of Groningen.[17] That ordination had been a major error, according to Obbe, and he wrote his confession mainly to rid himself of this guilt. Little historical objectivity is involved therefore.

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[15]Obbe Philips kept in close contact with the three apostles of Jan Matthijs—Bartholomeus Boekbinder, Willem de Kuiper and Pieter de Houtzager—who had also baptized in Friesland (around the turn of the year 1533/34, and including Obbe Philips in Leeuwarden), who had been the first (for Jan Matthijs) to propagate rebaptism in Münster in January 1534 and who had pronounced judgement on Amsterdam with drawn sword on 22 March 1534. See A.F. Mellink, *Amsterdam en de wederdopers in de zestiende eeuw* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1978) 31-32. Obbe travelled to Haarlem to see their mortal remains after they had been executed. See A.F. Mellink, *De wederdopers in de noordelijke Nederlanden, 1531-1544* (Groningen/Djakarta: J. B. Wolters, 1954) 367-368. See *DAN*, I, 113, n.4; *BRN*, VII, 46 and Mellink, *Wederdopers*, 381, for Obbe's involvement in the disturbances in Groningen, including the attack on the Johanniterklooster in Warfum, the actions of the prophet Hendrik Schoenmaker in 't Zand and the insurrection in Appingedam at the beginning of 1534. As a consequence, I share Mellink's opinion (*ibidem*, 394) that 'There is no escaping the impression that Obbe Philipsz, who had been less aloof during the years in question, voiced a fiercer condemnation of these events in retrospect—a familiar psychological figure.'

[16]*BRN*, VII, 135.

[17]*Ibidem*, 136.

The other theme which has become decisive in the perception of Menno Simons is his attitude on the question of discipline. One of the most important sources concerning the situation of the Mennonites in the sixteenth century is the writing 'Beginsel der scheuringen' (Start of the schisms).[18] The authorship of this writing is disputed, although its reliability is not. Brandt had already noted the impartiality of the author,[19] although a number of question marks are in order.[20] The writer himself had been excommunicated twice, and so it will be clear that his account is not without prejudice and therefore contains clear criticism of rigorous discipline. Anyone who shared this criticism then, and in later centuries, will have fewer doubts concerning his impartiality than anyone attempting to exercise some historical detachment. There is also a particular reason why this manuscript was not published in print until 1658. Halfway through the seventeenth century an increasing number of voices were heard—Galenus Abrahamsz de Haan was to become their spokesman—in favor of abandoning the traditional, closed Mennonite community, which had become so divided by that same severe discipline. This incited resistance on the part of the conservatives, however, who again started to argue the importance of the confessions and the disciplinary procedures laid down in them. The publisher's objective was to hold a mirror up to these conservatives, in whom 'something of the old leaven was revealed.'[21]

The development of discipline and Menno Simons' opinions on this subject are discussed at length in the 'Beginsel der scheuringen'. According to the author, external ordinances for which no justification could be found in the Scriptures had been

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[18]*Het beginsel en voortganck der geschillen, scheuringen, en verdeeltheden onder de gene die Doops-gesinden Genoemt worden, In dese laetste Eeuwe van hondert Jaren herwaerts, tot op de Jare 1615. Getrouwelijck beschreven door I. H. V. P. N.* (Amsterdam: Tymon Houthaak 1658). Text with preface in *BRN*, VII, 489-564. Carel van Ghendt is named as the possible author. He was present as recorder at the debate between the Flemings and Reformed in Emden, held in Emden from 27 February to 17 May 1578, and was one of the signatories to the *Protocol. Dat is, Alle handelinge des Gesprecks tho Emden* (Emden: Goossen Goebens, 1579). He was born in 1542, was excommunicated by the Frisians in 1568 and by the Flemings in 1580. According to S. Cramer (*BRN*, VII, 494-495), he subsequently took his leave of the external church and remained a free-thinking spiritualist, and therefore 'truly Doopsgezind' [sic!].

[19]Brandt, *Historie der Reformatie*, 179.

[20]J. G. de Hoop Scheffer, 'Eene geschiedenis van de doopsgezinden, van hunne geschillen en hereenigingen, door een doopsgezinde in 1647', *DB* (1876) 14-16.

[21]With regard to this suspicion, see the letter from an unknown author to Martin Schagen (1740) in *DB* (1863) 129.

forced on the simple and devout in times of severe persecution. According to the advocates of strict discipline, offences such as are stated in the fifth chapter of Ephesians should be punished by excommunication, without any admonition in advance, no matter how sincerely the sinner confessed his guilt and showed penitence. Not only were the sinners excluded from communion and the meetings, but the members of the congregation were not allowed to have anything to do with these offenders in public life. This was taken to such lengths sometimes that help and assistance in fire and flood were withheld from them. It was also possible for this complete shunning of excommunicated members of the congregation to lead to the separation of married couples. This was all done in the conviction that the congregation had to preserve its moral strength. In 1554 protests were heard from some Mennonites in North Holland and Friesland against this practice of excommunication without previous admonition. In their opinion, public sins had to be punished directly by the civil authorities. In accordance with the guidelines in Matthew chapter 18, sinners always had to be admonished three times first, before they were excommunicated.

According to the author of 'Start of the Schisms', the fact was that Menno Simons had been forced by Lenaart Bouwens, his fellow elder, to accept this rigid discipline under the threat of himself being relieved of the office of elder and losing his authority. This concession by Menno Simons prevented a break between Lenaart Bouwens and him, but did lead to the secession and condemnation of the moderate Waterlanders in 1557 and of the High Germans in 1559—they specifically rejected the shunning of spouses. Menno Simons was reproached for having given up his 'former gentleness' and for having embraced opinions which were totally opposed to his own original attitudes to excommunication. This opinion was shared by the High German elders Zylis and Lemmeken, who called Menno a 'weather vane' in this respect.[22] This judgement

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[22]'Een seer grondelijcke antwoordt . . . op Zylis en Lemmekes onverdiende lasterlijcke faemrooven', *Opera omnia*, 481b: "Understand first of all that Zylis makes me out to be a 'Ficfeyer'. The reason for this is that I issued two little books (so he says) against another." Menno provides a Low German explanation of the High German word 'Ficfeyer' in the margin: 'In our German, a wavering straw, treacherous water, a schemer, all this and more. The "weather vane" interpretation is taken from V. P. 'Successio Anabaptistica', in: *BRN* VII, 56, which also speaks of that "ill, unstable straw blown about by every wind" (*Ibidem*, 57).

Menno concedes in his reply dated 23 January 1560 that 18 or 19 years previously he had still believed that three admonitions should be given for all sins, and that he had not yet come to see that we humans may not keep people within the

marked Menno permanently from then onwards, despite the great efforts made later to soften this harsh judgement of him and to portray him as more of a victim than an implementor of severe discipline—although the latter is more probable.[23]

In the case of Menno Simons' stance in the question of discipline, a psychological interpretation has contributed to the underexposure of other factors in the conflict about discipline. Abhorrence of the excesses has meant too little understanding of the important role of discipline in the formation of a reformative movement in a hostile environment, for both Anabaptists and Calvinists.[24] Without pure doctrine and morals, a reformative movement lost its unity and appeal and did not last long. Furthermore, it is too often forgotten that the guidelines for biblical discipline—and the conflicts over its application!—developed only gradually in interaction with practical circumstances and the political situation. Finally, Menno's alleged ambivalence on the discipline question can also be better explained on the basis of his function as apologist and organizer than on the basis of his character. In order to preserve the unity of the Anabaptist movement after Münster, Menno was sometimes prepared to make concessions to a new generation of leaders who sought true discipline more in testing others than in testing themselves.[25]

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congregation whom God himself sets outside the congregation with his Spirit and his Word (*Opera omnia*, 482a). Around 1558 no fewer than 300 married couples were separated through shunning of the marital partner (*BRN*, VII, 455).

[23]For example, J. G. de Hoop Scheffer, 'Eenige opmerkingen en mededelingen betreffende Menno Simons, VIII', *DB* (1894) 70: "we will leave it to others to scorn him for his wavering and vacillation; we feel sympathy for the man who preferred to relinquish the reputation of remaining unwavering in all things than to reject the pleas of a penitent or to permit marital fidelity to suffer."

Contemporaries of Menno Simons, including Adam Pastor, mark Menno Simons out as an implementor of strict excommunication. See S. Voolstra, *Een gemeente van heiligen. De kenmerken van de ware kerk volgens Menno Simons* (Doperse Stemmen, 7) (Amsterdam: Doopsgezinde Historische Kring, 1994) 10,n.11.

[24]See Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin. A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford/Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990) 111: 'the very survival of Calvinist groups was dependent upon a strong and well-disciplined church, capable of surviving the hostility of its milieu.'

[25]This is the reproach addressed by Menno Simons' contemporary and follower, the Flemish Valerius Schoolmeester, to the supporters of legalistic rigor, which caused the initial love to cool. See: S. Voolstra, 'Valerius Schoolmeester (overleden omstreeks 1569). Leven en leer van een menniste hagepredikerin Zeeland in de reformatietijd' in: A. Wiggers et al., eds., *Rond de kerk in Zeeland.* (Third collection of contributions from the Vereniging voor Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis) (Delft: Eburon, 1991) 144-115.

Roman Catholic sources

Until the dissertation by P. J. A. Nissen, sixteenth and seventeenth-century Roman Catholic polemics played virtually no role whatsoever in the study of the Anabaptist movement in general, and in the formation of a judgment on Menno Simons in particular.[26] Nor do the Roman Catholic sources add very much that is new to the historical information on the life and person of Menno Simons. They apply a traditional heretic typology to judge and condemn the Anabaptist movement.

The Catholics regarded Menno Simons as the most important spokesman for North-west European Anabaptism because of his writings, which they could become acquainted with. Martinus Duncanus was filled with repulsion when he had studied a number of books written by Menno. In this first, and at the same time most complete refutation by a Catholic author of Menno Simons' baptismal doctrine in particular, the pastor of Wormer denounces Menno's fierce language against his mother church.[27] The Dominican Joannes Bunderius from Ghent suspected Menno and his followers of being affiliated with the revolutionary Anabaptists, despite their attempts to dissociate themselves from Müntzer and Münster.[28] There is an interesting remark made by Cunerus Petri to the effect that Menno Simons was 'a schoolmaster of boys' in Friesland, work which was quite often done by village priests.[29] Simon Walraven's *Successio Anabaptistica*, which was also consulted by Brandt (partly by reason of its moderate tone), is an indispensable source of insight into the character of Catholic polemics, but is also indispensable for the extensive historical information it contains on the conflict relating to discipline.[30]

The Catholic judgment of the Anabaptists was also determined by traditional assumptions about heretics which were in circulation

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[26]P. J. A. Nissen, *De katholieke polemiek tegen de dopers. Reacties van katholieke theologen op de doperse beweging in de Nederlanden (1530-1650).* (Dissertation, Catholic Theological University of Amsterdam, 1988).

[27]*Anabaptisticae haereseos confutatio, et vere christiani baptismi . . . assertio* (Antwerp: Johannes Gravius, 1549). See Nissen, *Katholieke polemiek*, 111-118.

[28]Joannes Bunderius, *De vero Christi baptismo* (Leuven: Martinus Rotarius, 1553). See: Nissen, *Katholieke polemiek*, 123-125.

[29]Cunerus Petri van Brouwershaven, *De schilt teghen die wederdoopers* (Leuven: Rutgerus Velpius, 1568). See Nissen, *Katholieke polemiek*, 129.

[30][Simon Walraven], *Successio Anabaptistica, Dat is Babel der Wederdopers* (Cologne: Bernardeus Gualtheri, 1603). See: Nissen, *Katholieke polemiek*, 152-156, which provides important new biographical information on the author. Re-published in *BRN*, VII, 1-87.

during the Middle Ages.[31] The heretic Anabaptists were linked with the Kingdom of the Devil and with the Anti-Christ. The Anabaptists could also be portrayed as 'the trash of the Underworld' in the metaphor of the classical world. So it is not surprising, within this frame of reference, that Menno with his opposition to the seven sacraments was compared to the seven-headed dragon from Revelation 13, a dubious honor which he shared with Luther.[32]

The pre-eminent heretic sin was the *superbia*, or pride, from which ensued all other sins characteristic of the Anabaptists—stubbornness, hypocrisy, and arrogance definitely being the most important of these. Specifically, no one should be blinded by their exceptional piety; this was only an outward appearance produced by inner pride. Menno, too, was included in this judgement because he, no less than Luther, imagined that he was preaching the true evangelical doctrine. His self-conceit met universally with fierce criticism, likewise his claim to have received his baptismal doctrine from the Holy Ghost itself, and thus as a result of independent bible study and not borrowed from Melchior Hoffman and associates. Added to this was his arrogation to judge all lords and rulers, and even the angels, by his doctrine on the Day of Judgement.[33]

Another often recurring characteristic is that of secretiveness. The Anabaptists' opponents complained that the Anabaptists were in the habit of operating in secrecy. Menno's writings were passed secretly hand-to-hand, which made it especially difficult to refute them. Just like the medieval heretics, the Anabaptists were *idiotae* or *illiterati*, simple people without schooling. Menno was accused of using his writings on the subject of the true apostolic church to attempt to lead mainly unschooled and uncertain folk astray, thus sowing discord in the one Catholic Christian church. We find many reminders of all these traditional heretic stereotypes in the Catholic polemic literature, but not so much reliable information is provided on the life and character of Menno, since the heretic typology has gravely distorted the historical information.

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[31]See Nissen, *Katholieke polemiek*, 242 ff. for this theme.

[32]Martinus Duncanus, *Anabaptisticae haereseos confutatio* (Antwerp: Johannes Gravius, 1549), +7r. In Nissen: *Katholieke polemiek*, 243.

[33]Stanislaus Hosius, *Confutatio Prolegomenon Brentii* (Antwerp: Joannes Steelsius, 1561) f. 12r-12v.

Reformed sources

We cannot allow the judgment of the Reformed on Menno Simons to depend solely on John Calvin: 'You cannot imagine anything more conceited that this ass, anything more insolent than this dog.'[34] The two reformers never met, although Menno did have discussions with a number of other Reformed opponents. Menno debated with the Polish theologian Joannes a Lasco in Emden from 28 to 31 January 1544. The document in which this superintendent of the Reformed refugee church in Emden pursued the discussion on the doctrine of incarnation in an amiable tone provides as little reliable biographical information about Menno Simons as the rest of the Reformed polemical literature.[35] But there is one exception: the discussions conducted in secret with the Reformed refugees from England in Wismar in the severe winter of 1553-1554 throw more light on Menno's debating method, and indirectly on the man himself. Five years later, Marten Mikron published his account of the discussions with Menno Simons on 6 and 15 February 1554.[36]

If we are surprised today by the fierceness with which these discussions were conducted, we must realize clearly what was at stake at the time. The authority of the doctrine of the Roman Catholic church was denied, to the extent that it was not in accordance with the Bible. This caused great insecurity. How could the faithful be assured of their ultimate salvation? A new path to holiness had to be opened for this purpose, with the Bible as the only reliable guide, since only belief in the most perfectly biblical teachings possible could offer the guarantee that sins would be forgiven and eternal salvation obtained. This meant that the certainty of salvation depended on the most biblical interpretation of who Christ was; and this was also the main topic of the debate between Menno Simons and the Reformed. Menno placed all emphasis on Christ's freedom from sin. How can Jesus Christ reconcile sinful human beings with God if he himself is not an immaculate sacrificial lamb? Christ's human nature can show no resemblance to fallen humankind. Christ did not receive his flesh

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[34]J. Calvin, *Opera*, X, 176: 'Nihil hoc asino posse fingi superbius, nihil petulantius hoc cane'. Quoted from S. Cramer, 'Menno's leven', *DB* (1904) 21-22.

[35]*Defensio verae semperque in Ecclesia receptae doctrinae de Christi Domini, Adversus Mennonem Simonis, Anabaptistarum Doctorem, per Ioannem à Lasco* (Bonn: Laurentius Mylius, 1545). Text: *Joannis a Lasco opera* vol. I, A. Kuyper, ed. (Amsterdam: F. Muller/'s-Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff, 1866) 3-60.

[36]*Een Waerachtigh verhaal der t' zamensprekinghen tusschen Menno Simons ende Martinus Mikron van der Menschwerdinghe Jesu Christis* (Emden: Gellius Ctematius, 1556).

from Mary, says Menno Simons in an echo of Melchior Hoffman. Christ, true man and true God, is a new creation of God. The Word has become flesh, repeats Menno constantly, and only faith in this immaculate Lamb can produce a community of saints without spot or wrinkle.[37]

The objections raised by the Reformed against Menno and his followers were that there can be no reconciliation in biblical terms until God, in the incarnation of his son, has identified himself completely with fallen humankind and was therefore not only completely God but also completely human. The Mennonites longed fiercely for the visible reality of the freedom from sin of the re-born man. The Reformed did not deny the importance of this longing but, in their eyes, humankind remained sinners, who could only believe that freedom from sin was imputed to them in the name of God. They could only conceive of freedom from sin as a promise and not as reality. It was exactly at this essential point that Mennonites and Reformed diverged in their ideas on the relationship between faith and works, and church and world.

In the first place, therefore, Menno's fierceness in debate was a consequence of the importance of the subject being debated; it is an expression of his pastoral concern for the salvation of the souls of the believers. This was, after all, a question of eternal life or eternal death. In addition, this fierceness naturally also says something about Menno's rhetorical qualities. We must not forget why Menno was asked by the leaders to assume the office of elder in 1536. He had in fact already acquired a reputation as a skillful polemicist through his refutation of the Münsterites; had already proved himself to be someone who was well able to counter his opponents.[38] The Anabaptist movement of Melchior Hoffman, Jan Matthijs, and other prophets had to be cleansed of revolutionary Münsterite taints, and people were needed who could do this and defend it to the authorities as an acceptable form of church reformation. Menno answered this call—in his many apologist writings, in his personal debates with priests to win them over to the Anabaptist reformation, and in his participation in clandestine

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[37]For a discussion of the doctrine of incarnation of Melchior Hoffman and Menno Simons, see S. Voolstra, *Het Woord is vlees geworden. De melchioritisch-menniste incarnatieleer* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1982).

[38]Nicolai writes the following about Menno's reputation around 1535: "And because most of the Anabaptists referred to M.[enno] S.[imons] as one who was well able to silence his opponents in debate." (BRN, *VII*, 461.)

and public debates with representatives of the reformed religion.[39] The authority of teacher, of *doctor ecclesiae*, was also ascribed to him by his followers and opponents alike.[40]

Not until we have made sufficient allowances for the importance of the new doctrine in the salvation of the soul and for Menno's function as official apologist for a movement which was struggling to survive, can we begin cautiously to say something about his personality. Both the Roman Catholic and the Reformed clergy were unanimous in their opinion that Menno's condemnation of them was couched in language which was too severe. And we must admit that Menno's objections to their 'comfortable lives', along the lines of Melchior Hoffman's strong anti-clericalism, sometimes appear to be more of a common shouting match than loving admonition. When he lacks other arguments to convince an opponent, Menno does not hesitate to call him a 'stupid clod'.[41] Furthermore, Menno often went back on what he had claimed earlier in the discussion or what he had agreed to, so that the claim that he showed inconstancy in his statements is not completely without justification. He is not quick to admit his error. This, too, is coherent with his apologetic function—loss of face meant lack of clarity concerning the path to salvation and a loss of followers who were searching fervently for certain salvation.

We have no choice on some occasions but to call Menno petty, such as when he seized on a printing error in the book written by his Reformed colleague Gellius Faber to accuse Faber of scandalous unorthodoxy. Nor was he prepared to retract this false accusation when it was pointed out to him that the author had corrected this

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[39]Menno was called to be an apologist of the Melchiorite movement after Münster: 'from the obligation of my office, laid on me by the God-fearing, unworthy as I am before God.' (*Opera Omnia*, 324b.)

[40]When Marten Mikron wished to bring other fellow-teachers also present into the debate, in addition to Menno, one of them, Herman v[an] T[ielt] rejects this with the words: 'Ask the teacher [=Menno] that: I leave teacher [=Menno] to treat with teacher [=Mikron]'. *DAN*, III, 109.

[41]According to Mikron: "Menno I cannot see that the foundations of your doctrine can concur with the Scriptures: and so Menno reviled him for a stupid clod." *DAN*, III, 86.

error with his own hand in his own copy.[42] This is a case in which we must even doubt Menno's integrity in debate.[43]

All sources prove exceptionally parsimonious with reliable biographical information. But perhaps something can be said about Menno Simons' personality on the basis of his iconography. All the portraits made of Menno are fictive to a high degree. According to an eye witness, Menno looked like a 'broad, fat, heavy man, "briecht" [possibly wry] of face with a brown beard, and he walked with difficulty'; this was in 1545, when Menno was approximately 49 years old.[44] (Illustration 2) It is much too hazardous to draw many conclusions from these brief details, unless it be that Menno's lameness must have proved an extra difficulty during his journeys. He will constantly have been forced to travel by coach or ship.

Also guesswork is the extent to which Menno's nature was related to the characteristic frame of mind attributed to his

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[42]In his *Eine Antwert Gellii Faber . . . up einen bitter hönischen breef der Wedderdöper* (Magdeburg: Ambrosius Kerckenher, 1552) Gellius Faber mistakenly called Christ '*boessgheld*' instead of '*loessgheld*' (cf. Mark 10:45), so that the 'losgeld' or ransom which was meant acquired the sense of 'boos geld' or tainted money. During the debate in Wismar Menno firmly maintained that Gellius Faber had written this on purpose. *DAN*, III, 98; 123; 190. We find the accusation repeated without either excuses or commentary in Menno's *Een klare beantwoordinge over een schrift Gellii Fabri, prediker tot Emden*, the printing of which had almost been completed during the debate. *Opera Omnia*, 313b; b324a. Repeated again in his *Een gans duytlijk, ende bescheyden antwoordt* [1556/7], in which he refutes Micron's account of the Wismar debate without retracting his error. *Ibidem*, 560a.

[43]Compare the judgement of K. Vos, *Menno Simons (1496-1561). Zijn leven en werken en zijn reformatorische denkbeelden* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1914) 112: 'Even if we do notice flaws in Menno's character, they only prove him to be a man of flesh and blood, in whom nature is stronger than doctrine. Yes, he is better than his weaker followers, who proudly announced their defenselessness in their everlasting squabbles, but proved only too combative. They lapsed into much worse ambiguities in the Frisian-Flemish and Huiskoopers disputes.'

Similar critical considerations on the part of Vos filled the American Mennonites with horror. John Horsch wrote the following to Harold S. Bender on 30 July 1921: 'He [i.e. Vos] describes him [i.e. Menno] as a person deficient of good moral character. In short, it is impossible for him to understand Menno Simons.' See Abraham Friesen, *History and Renewal in the Anabaptist/Mennonite Tradition* (North Newton, Kansas: Bethel College, 1994) 133, n.50.

[44]According to the witness of Jan Neulen in 1550. Menno had lodged with him before and Neulen had been punished for this by confiscation of his goods. In 1545 he took Menno and two companions by boat across the Maas from Vissersweert to Roermond. W. Bax, *Het Protestantisme in het bisdom Luik en vooral te Maastricht, 1505-1557* ('s-Gravenhage, Martinus Nijhoff, 1937) 330-331. The engraving by Christoffel van Sichem in *Het Toneel der Hooft-Ketteren* (Middelburg, 1677), in which Menno is depicted with a crutch, shows the most resemblance to this description. For the portraits of Menno, see *DB n.s.* 12-13 (1986-1987) 169 ff.

Illustration 2: Menno Simons. Engraving by Christoffel van Sichem, c. 1608, in *Het toneel der Hooft-Ketteren* (Middelburg, 1677). (Mennonite Library/University Library, Amsterdam)

contemporary co-religionists. They were not the most cheerful of people as a result of the gravity with which they wished to lead penitent lives. "Meek, with a somber regard, sighing" was how the Reformed Gerardus Nikolai typified the sixteenth century Anabaptists.[45] They had great consciousness of sin, reinforced by

[45]*DAN*, I, 112.

an apocalyptic attitude to life.[46] The struggle for perfection did not make their lives easy. "They have burdened themselves with loads which neither they nor others are capable of bearing", it is said in a rhetoricians' play.[47] Saturnine, melancholy spirits they were.[48] The apocalyptic, unbearable heaviness of being even drove some of them to suicide.[49] Menno has in any case a deep consciousness of sin in common with this frame of mind, and it filters through in many of his personal writings.[50]

The conceptualization of Menno Simons in Dutch Doopsgezinde historiography

Confessional Mennonites: 'Menno as an orthodox Protestant'

The Dutch Mennonites did not start writing their own history until the middle of the eighteenth century. This interest came to life mainly in the circles of the confessional Mennonites, who had broken with the anti-confessionals in 1664. Until 1801 they formed a separate religious community and were called Zonists, a name derived from the church building of their most important

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[46]This 'Bussdogmatik' which ensues from the Anabaptist preaching of repentance, and also the religious experience it arouses, has been most deeply gauged by F. Blanke, *Brüder in Christo* (Zürich: TVZ Verlag, 1975) 40. Sincere penitence as the most important condition for being a Christian binds the whole Anabaptist movement.

[47]"Tafelspel van Prochiaen, Coster en Wever", in L. M. van Dis, *Reformatorische rederijkersspelen uit de eerste helft van de zestiende eeuw* (Haarlem, 1937) 150-229, r. 1896-1897.

[48]How Menno's contemporaries viewed the saturnine man is appositely interpreted in *Der Scaepherders Kalengier* (1531), a fragment of which—with translation—is included in Gerrit Komrij, *De Nederlandse poëzie van de twaalfde tot en met de zestiende eeuw in duizend en enige bladzijden* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1994) 590-592. 'You must realize that all those born under my star are melancholy, and are also considered stubborn and strong. Many disadvantages are attached to this. They enjoy working in land reclamation and feed themselves with everything the earth produces. They like company. Their enmity and pugnacity can be everlasting. They often go on pilgrimages. They are thin, in addition to being tall, slim of body and limb and walk with measured steps. Small eyes, dry skin and a long beard are attributes of theirs. They are deceivers, traitors and murderers. They look at you wildly, have twisted feet and ugly teeth which definitely cannot be improved. Their physique makes them good workmen.' [paraphrase: S.V.]

[49]Menno opposes the accusation by Gellius Faber that the Anabaptists took their lives in desperation—because of Melchior Hoffman's tenet regarding the impossibility of forgiveness for deliberate sins after baptism. *Opera Omnia*, 283b.

[50]Compare Menno Simons' complaint in his *Voele goede und christelycke leringhen op den 25. Psalm* (1539) C3vo: 'O Lord, the fear in my heart is exceedingly great.'

congregation in Amsterdam.[51] The Zonists appointed themselves guardians of the orthodox Mennonite tradition, and so it is not surprising that they took a fresh interest in the life and work of their spiritual forefather. The question facing us now is, How did they make Menno Simons instrumental to their endeavors to justify the Mennonite tradition in eighteenth-century Dutch society?

Herman Schijn may rightly be called the founder of Dutch Mennonite historiography.[52] Neither he nor Gerardus Maatschoen, who edited and enlarged his historical work, wrote history in the modern sense, but concerned themselves with apologia. They wished to convince their compatriots of Mennonite loyalty and love of peace. In this way, they provided the arguments with which the Dutch authorities were also able to convince the magistrature in Bern that they should not persecute the Swiss Anabaptists as subversive citizens. The best proof that Mennonites were no revolutionary Anabaptists was Menno himself. He had turned against the Münsterites from the start, had he not? Furthermore, his teachings, as reflected in the confessions, showed clearly that orthodox Mennonites could not be accused of Socinianism by the Reformed church. After all, who had emphasized more strongly than Menno the perfect godliness of Christ as the foundation of the doctrine of reconciliation? Menno's doctrine of incarnation was wisely not mentioned, however. This characteristic of Mennonite orthodoxy was incompatible with Reformed orthodoxy.

Schijn and Maatschoen reduced Menno's significance and put it into perspective in other respects as well. On the one hand, it is true that they preferred the name Mennonites to Doopsgezind, in order to use this reference to the Mennonite confessions to distinguish themselves from their anti-confessional co-religionists who were accused of indeterminate tolerance and Socinianism. On the other hand, however, they weakened Menno's authority. In the question

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[51]A general introduction to the history of the Mennonites in this period will be found in Sjouke Voolstra, '"The colony of heaven": The Anabaptist aspiration to be a church without spot or wrinkle in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' in : Alistair Hamilton, et al., eds. *From Martyr to Muppy. A historical introduction to cultural assimilation processes of a religious minority in the Netherlands: the Mennonites* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994) 15-29.

[52]Herman Schijn (1662-1727), M. D., was minister of the Zonist congregations in Rotterdam and Amsterdam. In addition to devotional, polemical and catechismal work, he also left historical writings, the most extensive of which is his *Historiae Mennonitarum plenior deductio* (Amsterdam, 1729). This historical work was translated and published by Gerardus Maatschoen in an enlarged edition entitled *Geschiedenis dier Christenen, welke in de Vereenigde Nederlanden onder de Protestanten Mennoniten genaamd worden* (Three volumes, Amsterdam, 1743-45).

of discipline, they followed the moderate opinions of the Waterlanders and the Young Frisians, who had once been rejected by Menno. However praiseworthy Menno was considered to be, he could not be considered better than a fallible human being. He also had to be regarded more as an evangelical minster than as a scholar.

Retaining the name Mennonites, therefore, did not mean that the Zonists retained Menno's doctrine in full. The actual core of his teaching was baptism after rebirth, but also where this tenet was concerned the Zonists were not prepared to tolerate any extreme beliefs. In order to avoid being accused of proselytism, they rejected the rebaptism of those already baptized. In order to avoid being identified with Collegiant and Pietist conventicles, which were also regarded as a danger to church and society, they declared themselves to be against baptism by immersion as well. Every effort was made to allocate Menno a place of equal value beside the church reformers Luther and Calvin. "Mennonite Protestants" was their preferred designation as a consequence. In this way, they were able to express their established position as a respected, Protestant minority in the religiously pluriform society of the Netherlands.

Despite the tolerant attitude of their Dutch authorities, the Reformed ministers continued to pursue the Mennonites with weapons provided for them by Menno himself. Was it not a fact that he had called the rebellious Anabaptists "his dear brothers" in his *Fundamentboek*, an expression he had wisely omitted from later editions? How harmless was Menno in actual fact?—this Menno who was now being presented as a model of meekness and tolerance by his followers. The defense provided by Schijn and Maatschoen was not really convincing. They defended themselves with statements like: Menno called the Münsterites brothers out of care for their salvation, so that a spiritual affinity between the Münsterites and Menno could be ruled out.[53] They provided proof of his anti-Münsterite attitude by referring to the writing by Menno opposing Jan van Leiden, which did not appear in print until 1646 and whose authenticity is doubted to this day. Even the German Pietist Gottfried Arnold was called as a witness for the defense, since he had also attempted in his church history to clear the Anabaptist movement of charges of its revolutionary origins.[54]

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[53]Schijn/Maatschoen, *Geschiedenis der Mennonieten*, I, 301.

[54]*Ibidem*, 316-319.

The Zonists described their history as a process of breaking free from Melchiorism, and they subsequently introduced a distinction between the anti-confessional Doopsgezind and the confessional Mennonites in order to facilitate the integration with orthodox Reformed Protestantism. Menno Simons was used in the service of this objective to transform his followers into a respected and established minority within Dutch Protestantism. This meant, in concrete terms, that Menno's ideas on Christology, discipline, the office of elder, and the non-payment of ministers were discarded. It actually amounted to the acceptance of the confession of Lubbert Gerrits and Hans de Ries—the original opponents of Menno's ideas on Christology and discipline—as the touchstone of Mennonite orthodoxy in the seventeenth century.[55] What was the final judgement of the Zonists on Menno? Menno Simons deserved lasting respect, not for his doctrine but for his life. His writings were sharp-toned and lacking in structure, which could all be attributed to the persecutions and crudeness of the time. But, while Luther and Calvin could live in safety and tranquility, protected by weapons and the authority of powerful princes, Menno withstood persecution at the risk of his life. He was worthy of greater praise than the others, therefore, for this courage in faith.[56]

Conservative Mennonites, 'Menno as enduring guide'

The anti-confessional Doopsgezinden remained silent about Menno; the confessional Mennonites allowed him a voice as a representative of pluriform, orthodox Protestantism. But what did Menno mean to the Old Flemish, who could call themselves his most faithful followers, both in doctrine and way of life? In the middle of the eighteenth century, this smallest group of Dutch Anabaptists attempted to preserve its separate identity in an era of rationalism and moralism by publishing a confession of faith and a catechism.

Pieter Hendriks, minister with the Old Flemish in Sappemeer, wished to base the religious content of these documents on Menno's writings. In a fictional interview with Menno Simons, 'dear old man', he has Menno answer with quotations from his *Opera Omnia*, searching for confirmation of the interviewer's own ideas. When such methods are used, however, it is what Menno is not asked and what he does not have to answer as a consequence,

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[55]See Schijn/Maatschoen, *Geschiedenis der Mennonieten*, II, 252-272.

[56]*Ibidem*, 240-242.

which should be the subject of scrutiny. The change of interest is showed by what is not asked. Pieter Hendriks has Menno emphasize the primary importance of mercy, in contrast to the necessity of works. Without passing judgement on other confessions, he clings to a separate existence for the Old Flemish, characterized by the preservation of the tradition of unpaid ministers and the office of elder. Baptism without reform of the subject's life, and communion without proper preparation are rejected; the importance of the washing of feet as a sacrament is put into perspective. Marriage with someone of another faith is condemned; discipline is preserved, including a moderate use of excommunication and shunning; the swearing of oaths and the use of weapons is denounced; the Christian public authorities respected. In general terms, Menno's body of thought is retained, only his Christology and defense of the shunning of spouses are discarded. However, Menno's agreement with the Old Flemish tradition could not prevent this group's further fragmentation, and a century later it had dispersed completely.

Pietist Mennonites: 'Menno as the quiet one'

Finally, the Pietists renewed their interest in Menno Simons halfway through the eighteenth century, and to a great extent they have determined how he is perceived. The wealthy Amsterdam preacher Joannes Deknatel was one of the most important Mennonite followers of the Pietist Graf Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf in the Netherlands. Menno's works were virtually unobtainable in Deknatel's days and so he published an anthology of them, which was distributed widely outside the Netherlands in two German translations.[57] The choice of themes from Menno's writings makes it all too clear that Menno is being produced here as the defender of Pietist neo-orthodoxy. Deknatel ranges Menno against the moralism and the sanctity of works professed by his co-religionist contemporaries; humankind, through the fall of Adam reduced to powerlessness, will not be saved by works, but only by the personally sustained belief in Christ's redeeming blood and his merits. Menno's doctrine of rebirth constituted proof that Pietism

[57]Joannes Deknatel, *Menno Simons in 't kleine* (Amsterdam, 1753; 2nd edition 1758). German translations: *Kurzer Auszug von Menno Simons Schriften* (Büdingen, 1768); *Auszug der merkwürdigsten Abhandlungen aus den Werken Menno Simons* (Königsberg, 1765). Biographical data will be found in *BLGNP*, 1, 62-64. Deknatel was a minister with the liberal a-confessional Lamists who had financed his studies. The Zonists would definitely not have agreed with the 'ecumenical' disposition of the Pietists, who attached little importance to confessions and church forms.

was no new doctrine in the Mennonite church—this is what Deknatel impressed upon his rationalist co-religionists who accused the Pietists of zealotry and passivity.

Menno emerges from Deknatel's anthology as a Pietist *avant la lettre*. His weaknesses, such as his fierceness and his verbose and improper style, are forgiven him. Nothing is said about his unorthodox doctrine of incarnation and his rigorous discipline. The sharp contours of the church have become unrecognizably faint. Rebirth becomes the most important characteristic of the true faith. The origins of the Anabaptist movement in the Waldensians is

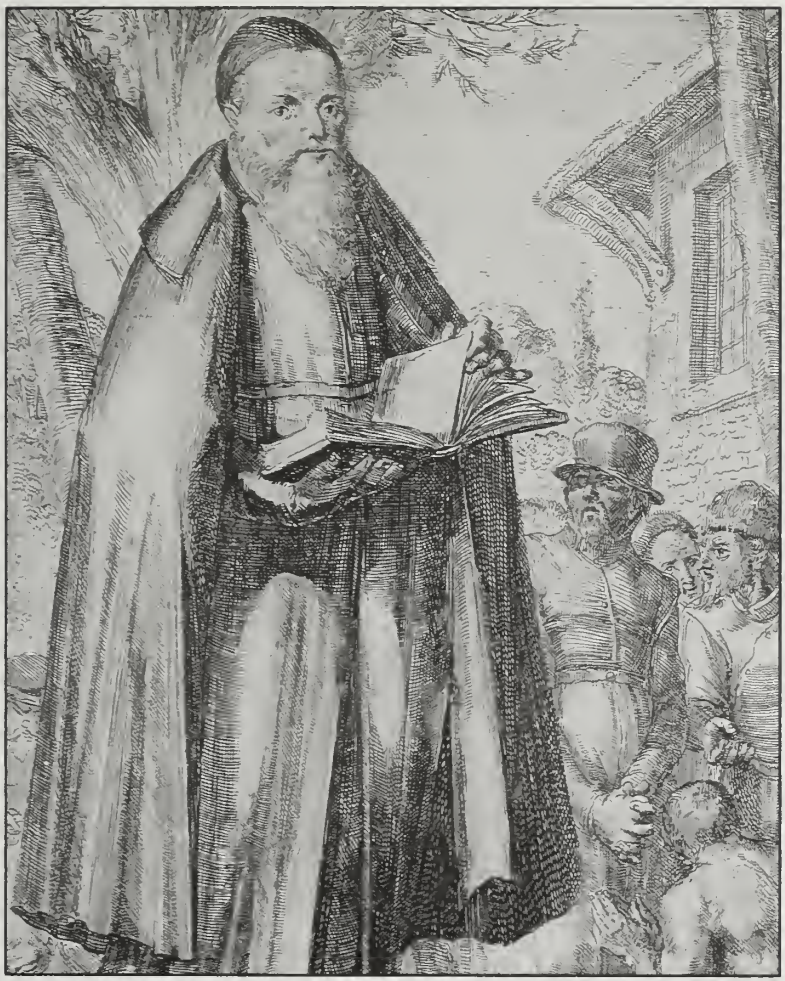

Illustration 3: Menno Simons. Engraving by Romeyn de Hooghe, 1710, in Gottfried Arnold, *Historie der Kerken en Ketteren* (Amsterdam 1701). (Mennonite Library/University Library, Amsterdam)

suggested as a probability. This new perception of the mild and pious Menno had already been pre-formed in the Pietist historiography of Gottfried Arnold. He had the pretension to create a place in church history in an impartial and supra-confessional manner for the Anabaptists and spiritualists, for those believers who were characterized by their great piety and moral integrity.[58] The print by Romeyn de Hooghe in Arnold's history book portrays Menno for us as the imposing minister of such godly folk, and declaiming from the Bible. The central theme of his teachings—baptism as the token of rebirth—is denoted by a person receiving baptism rising up out of the water in the open air. (Illustration 3) This engraving makes an actual link between Menno and the Pietist baptism by immersion, a practice which Menno himself did not explicitly decree.

The portraits done of Menno in later centuries softened and ennobled his features according to the Pietist example. 'Menno Simons—as his doctrine and brotherhood. Simple and profound', fawned the Zürich philosopher Johann Caspar Lavater (1741-1801).[59] He must have had in mind Menno Simons' portrait made by Burghart in 1683. (Illustration 4.) But this Pietist Menno as the prototype and reflection of the silently pious has lost all resemblance to the fierce preacher of penitence from the turbulent beginnings of the Anabaptist movement.

Liberal Doopsgezind: "Menno as virtuous Dutch citizen"

Almost a century was to pass before Menno again became a focus of attention. Times had changed.[60] The sharp distinction between confessionals and anti-confessionals had faded gradually in the second half of the eighteenth century. The conservatives had

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[58]The Dutch translation of Gottfried Arnold's *Unparteiischen Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie* (1699/1700) appeared in two volumes: Godfried Arnold, *Historie der kerk en ketteren* (Amsterdam: Sebastian Petzold, 1701). The biographical information on Menno Simons is to be found in volume II, 532.

[59]Lavater's full character sketch is as follows: 'Menno Simons—just as his doctrine and his brotherhood. Simple and profound. Not hard; not weak; silently searching with a thirst for the truth, acting in silence with mildness and dedication, calm, tinged with melancholy. Seeing with silent sympathy. Especially open in the contours of the nose—such dedication, wisdom, competence! Mouth and chin, as much as can be seen of them—loyalty, modesty, reticence.' J. C. Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmenten* (1775-1778) III, 267. Quoted from, *Mennonitische Blätter*, 1910, 86.

[60]For a review of this period see S. Voolstra, '"The hymn to freedom": The redefinition of Dutch Mennonite identity in the Restoration and Romantic period (approx. 1810-1850) in: Hamilton et al., eds., *From Martyr to Muppy*, 187-202.

Illustration 4: Menno Simons. Engraving by Jacobus Burghart, 1683. Reproduced by the Mennonite Church at Hamburg. (Mennonite Library/University Library, Amsterdam)

become isolated and had as good as died out. The Doopsgezind—they intentionally no longer called themselves Mennonites—were open to all the spiritual movements of their times without allowing themselves to be tempted to extremes. Moderation became their hallmark. Their piety was a vague mixture of Rationalist moralism and Pietist subjectivity. The Doopsgezind congregations had been united without any confessional foundations in the Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëteit since 1811, and they started to appoint only preachers who had

been educated at the seminary. The Doopsgezind had had equal rights with the public church since the French period, and were only too willing and prepared to sacrifice the right to renounce the bearing of arms.[61] The Doopsgezind gradually started to add political power to the social status already acquired in the eighteenth century. The young Kingdom of the Netherlands was in need of heroes to shape the national identity, while the Romantic historiography fulfilled this need for national identification. But the Doopsgezind had a head start in this connection—they alone could boast of a native Dutch reformer at the origin of their church. After all, Luther and Calvin had been imported products who were not in keeping with the liberal national character, of which the Doopsgezind now regarded themselves as the outstanding representatives.

The first monograph on Menno Simons appeared in 1837, three centuries after he had left the Roman Catholic church and become the most important leader of the post-Münsterite and anti-Münsterite Anabaptists. The book by A. M. Cramer, a Doopsgezind minister from Middelburg, showed no evidence of independent historical research, being more of a synthesis of information from older and more recent secondary literature, and from Menno's *Opera Omnia*.[62] But what indeed were Cramer's assessments of Menno's relationship with Münster, his ideas on the disciplined church and his personality?

Cramer expresses tentative criticism of the hypothesis that the Dutch Anabaptists were descended from the Waldensians, thus allowing them to deny their Münsterite origins.[63] There were

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[61]As early as 1783 a Doopsgezind patriot in Twente defended the participation in drill companies with an appeal to Menno, "How times change! But Father Menno, that advocate of rational virtue, would certainly also have defended and supported freedom if he had lived in these days, either that or he must have been a coward, although such a one was never a good reformer." C. Elderink, *Een Twentsch Fabriquer van de achttiende eeuw* (Hengelo, 1977) 76.

[62]A. M. Cramer, *Het leven en de verrigten van Menno Simons, voorafgegaan door een inleidende verhandeling over den oorsprong en de opkomst der doopsgezinden, voornamelijk in de Nederlanden* (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1837). Cramer (p. 46, n.1) used works by Brandt, Schijn, Arnold, Mosheim, Starck, Ypeij and the article entitled 'Leven van Menno Simons' by J. Plantinus in *Vaderlandsche letteroefeningen* (1818), 733-746, in his sketch of the course of Menno's life.

[63]The analogy between Waldensians and Anabaptists had already been made by Hans de Ries in the introduction to his *Martelaersspiegel* (1631) 50-53, documented by T. J. van Braght in the first part of his *Martelaersspiegel* (1685) 305 ff. This idea was derived from Sebastian Franck, *Chronica* (1536), 230vo. The resemblance, not the direct historical relationship, was confirmed by the Remonstrant theologian Philippus van Limborch in his *Historia Inquisitionis* (1682), liber I, cap. VIII, p.37, and later found

analogies in thinking, but the historical relationship had not been proved. He sought the origins in Switzerland, where he also presumed a direct historical relationship between Waldensians and Anabaptists. It was, however, no simple matter to show how the ideas of Michael Sattler had been constitutive for Dutch Anabaptism.[64] For this reason, he concluded that the Doopsgezind church had evolved from personal study of the Bible and that the reason for its existence should not be sought with any single great reformer, but in the medieval sects where the spirit of Christ had been preserved in its purest form.[65] This hypothesis served two objectives; the Münsterite origins could be circumvented and the doctrinal authority of Menno put into perspective. The nineteenth-century Doopsgezind had put every binding doctrinal authority behind them. There was no longer any regard for Menno as apologist and founder of doctrinism. He had only uplifted his co-religionists and admonished them to stand fast in difficult times.

Menno Simons' first biographer was sufficiently honest to admit that Menno would not have recognized the nineteenth-century Doopsgezind as kindred spirits. If there was anything that still bound them, it was a spirit of freedom, equality, and brotherhood, in addition to their common beliefs concerning baptism and swearing oaths. The idea of the church isolated from the world by discipline had lost its meaning.[66] We must regard Menno's goal of founding a pure church as a failure. This is not surprising, however, since the ideal of the perfect church as he had imagined it does not exist, according to Cramer. And yet it is still permissible to call Menno the founder of a religious community, a community in which the spiritual nature—i.e. the apolitical character—of Christian faith is emphasized, and the freedom of human religious principles and Bible study are preserved. The call to pure morals and baptism after rebirth is what still remains of Menno's message. The rejection of violence, the death penalty, and public office are

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more or less convinced supporters in Galenus Abrahamsz., M. Schagen, J. H. Halbertsma, S. Blauwpot ten Cate, and L. Keller, among others.

[64]Cramer, *Menno Simons*, 19: 'There [in Michael Sattler and his associates, of whom it was assumed that they were of Waldensian origin] we find the origins of the Doopsgezinden! Now that we see from history that they gradually became known from Switzerland to the Netherlands, what can be more natural than to think that these feelings were propagated by degrees in silence?'

[65]Cramer, *Menno Simons*, 38.

[66]*Ibidem*, 38-41.

not included. Menno made no clear pronouncements on these subjects, according to Cramer.[67]

The portrait which Cramer painted of Menno Simons can scarcely be described as original. Menno had been cured of his initial hesitating fearfulness in the course of his life, but his character had remained a melancholy one. Logically enough, Cramer sought an explanation for his lack of candor and straightforwardness in the persecutions to which he was constantly exposed. Menno Simons was more a man with a cramped and small spirit rather than a great and free one, also when compared with his fellow reformers, no great leader and lacking in exceptional refinement, as his style of writing shows. None of his writings, with the exception of the historical ones, were important enough to be republished. It was not for these, but for his virtues that Menno earned everlasting respect, such as his longing for truth, sincere faith in Christ, modesty and resolve, fierce zeal in the cause of his Master and the salvation of his fellow humans, proven in fearless preaching and tireless labor. All of this was recognized by Cramer, notably in the 1683 portrait of Menno by J. Burghart, which has served as an example for many later engravings. And he also expressed the wish that all previous images of Menno should be replaced by this portrait.[68]

With this perception of Menno before them, the nineteenth century Doopsgezind began to create a distinct profile for themselves in their struggle to be recognized as a religious community which expresses the ideal of a non-sectarian, non-dogmatic, free Protestant church, subservient to the development of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The most important thing was the encouragement of their own, independent, free piety, a practical and profound Christianity. Constant vigilance was required to ensure that this inner piety was not threatened by 'outward' traditions, such as defenselessness, simplicity of clothing, home and lifestyle, as well as subdued behavior.[69] The sharp features of the perception of Menno had faded so much by the end

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[67]*Ibidem*, 154-160.

[68]*Ibidem*, 157, n.2

[69]Laughing was considered unseemly by conservative Mennonites, as is shown in W. J. van Douwen, *De Gemeente. Geschriftjes ten behoeve van de Doopsgezinden in de verstrooing*, 12 (1901) 11: 'My father used to tell me now and then about his "Uncle Durk", who did not dare to laugh, and who was ashamed and hid himself away for a while if he had to laugh sometimes in spite of himself. We would probably wonder if someone like that was out of his mind. So great is the distance between us and those severe times.'

Illustration 5: Menno Simons Memorial at Witmarsum (1879). (Mennonite Library/University Library, Amsterdam)

of the nineteenth century that even as leader he was compared with and replaced by Hans Denck, who had been made the precursor of free and undogmatic Protestantism by Ludwig Keller.[70]

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[70]G. E. Frerichs, *Menno Simons*, III. *Geschriftjes ten behoeve van de Doopsgezinden in de Verstrooing* (1899) 6: 'But there was such a loving heart in Menno, that what he says about the use of excommunication almost sounds like the words of Hans Denck in our ears.' For the nineteenth century Hans Denck revival, see Abraham Friesen, *History and Renewal in the Anabaptist/Mennonite Tradition* (North Newton, Kansas: Bethel College, 1994) chapters 3 and 4; and the enthusiastic Denck reception among

The perception of Menno had become so blurred that it proved impossible to find a characterization of Menno's person and merits which could be inscribed on the obelisk unveiled in Witmarsum, his birthplace, on 11 September 1879. (Illustration 5.) Qualifications such as 'Dutch church reformer' and 'Founder of the Doopsgezind religious community' were believed to do him too much honor and to be historically inaccurate. The person who delivered the official speech at the unveiling of the monument, summarized Menno's message as a proclamation of the 'complacent majesty of the conscience'; 'See! Here is a man who teaches us to be aware of the beauty of one virtue which dazzles by its own shine alone'.[71] In this way, more right was done to the virtue of the nineteenth century Doopsgezind middle-class than to Menno Simons himself. Menno Simons had been reduced to a symbol of the virtuous nineteenth-century Doopsgezind, conservative-liberal citizen. Conservative, because he believed that the national interest was better served by the established middle-class than by the democratic will of the people; liberal, because as an advocate of a non-dogmatic Christendom, he opposed the generation of political power by the Reformed and the Roman Catholics. The festive unveiling of the insipid commemorative column was brought to a close by a concert given by the First Infantry Regiment in the Witmarsum state school. The assimilation of Menno's descendants could have had no better symbol.

Menno cannot be called the founder of a religious community or an original theologian, and by no means a leader. His character combined humility, limited self-conceit, vacillation, profound piety and steadfast love for the church, caution and obstinacy, all at the same time. This is the summary of the nineteenth century perception of Menno Simons as collated and presented on an international scale by prof. Samuel Cramer, the son of Menno Simons' first biographer.[72] The portrait of a bald-headed Menno was believed to be a contemporary likeness, and very reliable as a consequence. But this perception was incorrect as well. The person

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the Dutch Doopsgezind: Tj. Kielstra, *Hans Denck (1498-1527). Geschriftjes ten behoeve van de Doopsgezinden in de Verstrooing*, 3 (s.a.) 14: 'Freedom is our cry and so it shall remain! Let the trust in the good that comes from God (Denck did not err!), and which as a seed, as a spark, lies dormant in the bottom of every human heart, remain with us evermore!'

[71]P. Cool and P. Feenstra Jr., *Gedenkschrift van het Menno-Simons Monument* (Zwolle: W. E. J. Tjeenk Willink, 1879) 25; 60.

[72]See his article in Herzog, *Real-Encyclopaedie*, XII (1903), included in a Dutch translation in *DB* (1904) 1-29.

shown actually proved to be Menno's fellow Frisian, Viglius van Aytta, an important adviser to the Habsburg government and, as such, one of those responsible for the decrees against the Anabaptists. The persecutor and the persecuted were thus identified with each other in an ironic manner.

The twentieth-century perception of Menno Simons is somewhat less self-glorifying than that of the late nineteenth century. The lack of interest in Menno Simons' theology remains unchanged because its relevance is as little felt as in the previous century. The apologist historiography has, however, made way for research into reliable historical information. In historical terms, the Menno Simons biography by K. Vos may rightly be described as a milestone which no researcher whatsoever can ignore, not even today, despite the fact that one may not share his interpretation of the theological significance of Menno Simons. The fact is that Vos, a Social Democrat, actually used Menno too much as a representative of an anti-confessional piety in order to offer a counterbalance to the Calvinist neo-orthodoxy of his own times.[73] His considerable historical knowledge enabled him to criticize the nineteenth-century interpretation of Menno Simons. The modern Doopsgezind theologian S. Hoekstra Bzn, for example, had denied the spiritual authority of Menno Simons for the entire Doopsgezind tradition and accused him of a lack of originality.[74] Vos refuted this harsh sentence on the part of Hoekstra by demonstrating his lack of historical knowledge and injustice.[75]

Later twentieth century researchers have, as yet, found little to add to the historical information collected by Vos. Dutch Doopsgezind historians preferred the spiritual leaders of a less-sharply defined Anabaptism, such as Hans de Ries and Galenus Abrahams de Haan. It was only in the years in which his birth,

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[73]Vos, *Menno Simons*, 218.

[74]S. Hoekstra Bz, *Beginselen en leer der oude Doopsgezinden vergeleken met die van de overige Protestanten* (Amsterdam: P. N. van Kampen, 1863) 131-132: 'I cannot imagine a greater complete lack of all real genius with a certain degree of common sense than I find in Menno and Philips (who was superior to Menno nevertheless) judging by their writings. That verbosity, that stringing together of texts, that strange sophism, which always characterizes the reasoning of persons from the lower classes, that constant restating of the same theme, that poverty of ideas and words which leads Menno in particular to repeat himself endlessly; this is what makes the writings of Menno and Philips virtually unreadable for anyone of refinement. There are no traces of either originality or independence.'

[75]Vos, *Menno Simons*, 216-217.

departure from Popedom, and his death were commemorated that a consideration of Menno Simons was unavoidable.[76]

It was more respectful sympathy than shared beliefs which prompted the twentieth-century Doopsgezind to commemoration. It was impossible for the Dutch Doopsgezind to continue honoring Menno Simons as the spiritual father of their religious movement. Menno had discarded the free-thinking Doopsgezind and alienated himself from them. They preferred to identify with the moderate Waterlanders and the spiritualist figures on the fringes of the Anabaptist movement. An overwhelming majority of them felt most closely allied to those groups which had been furthest away from Menno.[77] Furthermore, the contemporary rejection of doctrinism and church discipline brought about a distortion of the task of Menno Simons as apologist and organizer. If there was any awareness of Menno Simons' role in the process of institutionalization and confessionalization of the originally multi-colored Anabaptism, then it was regarded as a road to decline.

The actual situation also influenced the Menno interpretation of N. van der Zijpp. His fear of the demand for a sharper definition of Mennonite doctrine made by eleven Doopsgezind ministers after the Second World War meant that he could not regard Menno Simons as anything other than a variant of a modern, non-

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[76]On the occasion of the fourth centenary of Menno's birth (1492, not 1496, was originally regarded as the year of Menno's birth) [C.P. van Eeghen], *Menno Simons. Tractaten over den doop, het avondmaal, enz. Voorafgegaan door een kort levensberigt en M.S.' 'Uitgang van het Pausdom'* (Amsterdam: J. Müller, 1892) appeared; to commemorate the year of his death, H. W. Meihuizen, *Menno Simons. Ijveraar voor het herstel van de Nieuwtestamentische gemeente (1496-1561)* (Haarlem: H. D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1961). In 1936 virtually no attention was paid to the commemoration of Menno's break with the Roman Catholic church. The authoritative Doopsgezind church historian W. J. Kühler considered this a somewhat unfortunate episode in Menno's life and refused to lend his cooperation to the commemoration in the year in which the Mennonite World Congress was held on Dutch soil for the first time. See F. Kuiper, 'Voor de tweede keer naar Amsterdam', *In dit Amsterdam*, VII/7-8 (1967) 100. This omission was rectified fifty years later by the appearance of *Uyt Babel ghevloden, in Jeruzalem ghetogen. Menno Simons' verlichting, bekering en beroeping* by W. Bergsma and S. Voolstra. Doperse Stemmen 6 (Amsterdam: Doopsgezinde Historische Kring, 1986) and M.C. Postema, *Het spoor van Menno Simonsz' gedachten. Een verkenning van Menno Simonsz' opvattingen aangaande het christelijk geloof* (Kampen, J. H. Kok, 1986).

[77]W. J. Kühler, *Geschiedenis der Doopsgezinden in de zestiende eeuw* (Haarlem: H. D. Tjeenk Willink, 1932) 331.

dogmatic, and anti-authoritarian free-thinking preacher.[78] In the same vein, H. W. Meihuizen also hesitates between 'revilement and veneration, between moderate appreciation and sympathetic indifference' where the evaluation of Menno Simons' life and work was concerned. Meihuizen went so far in this 'moderate appreciation', however, that he considered Menno's attempt to organize and purify the Anabaptist movement as a reversion to the Münsterite error of wanting to build a Christian church with human aids.[79] Every form of shared confession was feared as a threat to the personal freedom of belief. Non-Doopsgezind authors on Menno Simons were more successful in presenting a more objective impression of his significance, although they added no new historical information to that collected by Vos.[80]

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[78]N. van der Zijpp, *Geschiedenis der Doopsgezinden in Nederland* (Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1952) 58, "Like the old Anabaptists, Menno too did not, on principle, want any decisive authority on questions of faith and the problems with which the conscience is confronted other than Holy Scripture alone." By this remark he is already implicitly turning against the 'confessionalist' tendencies expressed by 'the eleven' young Doopsgezind ministers in their document entitled *Doopsgezind belijden nu* (Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij Holland, 1954).

[79]H. W. Meihuizen, *Menno Simons. IJveraar voor het herstel van de Nieuwtestamentische gemeente (1496-1561)* (Haarlem: H. D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1961) 66-67. The title (*Menno Simons. Advocate of the reinstatement of the New Testament church*) is therefore also in opposition to the tenor of his individualistic Menno interpretation. It was, however, impossible to ignore the dissertation by Cornelius Krahn, *Menno Simons (1496-1561). Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Theologie der Taufgesinnten* (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1936), which had put Menno's ecclesiology in a central position.

The spiritualist abhorrence of the visible church leads Meihuizen to exercise censorship in his anthology from Menno's works. One of Menno's characteristics of the true church, viz. that (in addition to the individual believer) the church of Christ bears fruit, is regarded as an inconsistency in Menno's thought and is omitted as a consequence. (pp. 66-67).

[80]See the works of the Baptist J. A. Brandsma, *Menno Simons van Witmarsum. Voorman van de Doperse beweging in de lage landen* (Drachten: Laverman, 1960) and of the Dutch Reformed M. S. E. Visser, *Minne Simens en de minnisten* (Bolsward: A. J. Osinga, 1960). Visser gave a critical evaluation of what remained of Menno's legacy in Friesland, 'Here in Friesland very little remains of the old faith of Menno Simons. The spiritual ties between Menno and the Mennonites is lacking. How times change. The orthodox Mennonites, those who still exist, work together with the Orthodox and the reformed in many fields.' (p. 145). The Frisian Doopsgezinden were unable to agree with this however, and Visser was accused of 'Calvinist intolerance', which was 'at odds with the Christendom which Menno Simons and the Mennonites wished and still wish to bring about.' From the review of Visser's book by Sybe Sybesma, quoted in the *Leeuwarder Courant*, 18.2.1961.

Epilogue

At present, Menno Simons only continues to merit respect in his native country because of his love for the unattainable ideal. The ideal itself has proved a mistake. The memory of the messenger is kept alive, while his message is scarcely listened to. We only know the perception of Menno to the extent that it has been formed and distorted in accordance with the ideas and longings of each era. For those who no longer experience anything of him, we can do nothing else than suggest his contours in the sketch we design of his times. *Menno Simonis, persona ingrata in patria sua.* We find everything that is left of him in those of his writings which have come down to us. And they are waiting patiently until someone gives him a face and a voice again.

Menno Simons' Post-Sacramentalist Interpretation of Penance, Eucharist, and Baptism

Chapter 2

The anticlerical priest: From father confessor to lay preacher of true penitence

Menno Simons was a Catholic priest. As a consequence, the study of his spiritual development must take his calling to the traditional priesthood seriously and also attempt to assess the extent to which this calling had a lasting influence on his piety. The study will be all the more fruitful if his doctrine and life are related to his position as a village priest and are furthermore placed in the context of the changes which took place in the Roman Catholic church in the Netherlands since the third decade of the sixteenth century. How did these changes affect his work as a clergyman, and how did they shape his gradual development into an evangelical preacher and later into the spiritual leader of the Anabaptists after Münster?

Menno Simons' spiritual development is inextricably bound up with the process of re-orientation in which church and society found themselves in his time. The monk Luther sought to escape from his existential distress and asked: 'How do I obtain a merciful God?'. The liberating answer was: 'Not through a holiness which can be earned, but though trust in the unmerited forgiveness through Christ alone.' On the basis of this doctrinal reformulation of the new certainty of salvation, a second generation of reformers—such as Martin Bucer and John Calvin—started to consider the form of the church which would be able to translate this new truth into doctrine and life. The question of the justification of the sinner through faith alone made room for the more practical question of the regeneration of the believer. Once that point had been reached, the Anabaptists joined in the reformational discussion. The Anabaptists were regarded as heretics, not only by the Catholics but by the Protestants as well, because of their one-sided emphasis on sanctification.

But why focus attention on Menno Simons' work as a priest in the spiritual climate of the third decade of the sixteenth century in the Netherlands? The reason is that in this way greater justice can be done to the origin and development of his ideas than when we try to trace these back to medieval heresies, such as that of the Waldensians; or to expressions of lay piety, such as those of Modern Devotion; or to popular mysticism, such as that of 'Theologia Deutsch' or Tauler. Nowhere in the works of Menno Simons do we find explicit references to these religious movements,

although it may be possible to show implicit analogies with these types of piety. Furthermore, they cannot have been of much help to him in the design of his church reform, because they lack any kind of clearly-defined ecclesiology. The determination of some affinity with certain traditional or contemporary types of piety is as far as we can go. They are inadequate as an explanation for the inception of the Anabaptist reformation. At the start of the sixteenth century, these movements lacked the influence and power to bring about an actual reformation. We would be better advised to attempt a sketch of the traditional religious world and look there for points of departure for the major changes which were the consequence of the rediscovery and reassessment of a religiosity founded strictly on the Bible.

The Last Judgement in word and image

Salvation was presented graphically to the late-medieval believer. The sacrifice of Christ was performed as a play during mass. Christ, Mary and the saints, the intercessors in sanctification, were tangibly and visibly present in the church building. A painting of the Last Judgement behind the altar illustrated what the believer must prepare for during his life. In order to transport ourselves to the religious world of Menno Simons, we should try to look at such an altar piece with his eyes.

In the center, we see Death portrayed with a shroud flapping around his skeleton. He stands on an open coffin, raises his bow and aims a deadly arrow at the viewer. A pile of the bodies of those hit by his arrows lies in the foreground. On the right, we see men and women who are committing all sorts of wickedness and are being herded together by the devil and his henchmen to be thrown into the jaws of hell. On the left, we see the pious people and their good works depicted. They are being gathered together for their journey to heaven by an angel acting as tour guide. Christ is enthroned as a judge in the clouds, with Mary and John the Baptist beside him to pray for humanity. This image was imprinted on the memory of the believer.[1] He was painfully conscious of his final destination throughout every moment of his life. Would he find

[1]The portrayals of the Last Judgement on the back of a retable had a special power, because confession was often heard behind the altar. Since people only went to confession once per year, in general, the rarely-seen painting had an extraordinary effect on those who had to account to the priest for their deeds. See: Louise Böhling, 'Jörg Kändel von Biberach und die Altäre des Parallelfaltenstils in der Schweiz', *Anzeiger für Schweizerische Altertumskunde*, NF 34 (1932) 28-38; 34ff.

eternal death along the path of wickedness, or eternal life along the path of virtue?

The only authority which could decide on his ultimate redemption was the church with its sacraments. The individual soul was imprisoned in a lifelong cycle of sin, forgiveness, and doing penitence; of falling, being raised up again, and performing works in atonement of guilt. This cycle was determined by the power of sin which caused weak humankind to break God's laws time and time again, and by the forgiveness of sins offered by the church in the sacrament of penitence. Guilt was dispelled by confession and absolution. The punishment which the church laid on the sinner could be lessened by the works of satisfaction. The punishment which still remained when someone died could be wiped out in purgatory through prayers of intercession, requiem masses, good works, and indulgences from the relatives, after which the gates of heaven finally opened. Only martyrs and heretics did not have to remain in this waiting room; the former went straight to heaven, the latter straight to hell. Unbaptized dead children remained in limbo, a neutral place where they neither suffered nor enjoyed the bliss of heaven.

Confession and doing penance were the believer's most important religious activities. Confession was the most important part of the preparation for life's end and the believer had to go to confession at least once per year, usually as preparation for Communion at Easter. The objective of confession was to reveal sins and to intensify repentance for the sins committed. The task of the father confessor was to guide the penitent in making the most perfect confession and subsequently to assure him of forgiveness, which could only be obtained by opening oneself completely to the redeeming effect of the sacraments of the church. This gave the priest enormous power. His absolution enabled him to offer grace in a miraculous manner as a counterweight to the weakness and doubts of the believer. Nevertheless, that doubt could never be completely dispelled in a true believer. Was his penitence perfect enough? Had he provided sufficient works of atonement to inherit everlasting life? How long would he still have to be purified in purgatory before he could enter through the gates of heaven? The church had the indulgences at its disposal to remove these doubts—as a life insurance for the deceased. The relatives could buy shares in the surplus of grace which the church had at its disposal as a result of the merits of Christ and the saints, and with these shares they could pay off the debt still to be discharged by the deceased, shorten his stay in purgatory and have him transported to heaven by the angels. But no money meant no mercy.

This sacramental grace, obtained exclusively through the intercession of the priest, provided the believer with certainty, as long as he believed in it firmly. In the third decade of the sixteenth century, however, Luther denounced the inflation to which the indulgences were subject, because they were being traded as insurance policies for eternal life without the sinner having to show the necessary repentance for his sins. In these same years Menno Simons, as a minor depository keeper of the mercy of the Roman Catholic church in the parishes of Pingjum and Witmarsum, heard worrying reports of the imminent crash of the mercy exchange in the German states. And he started to wonder how he could provide himself and his parishioners with more certainty of salvation than was possible by means of the devalued traditional sacraments of the church.

It is a misunderstanding that Menno Simons with his growing doubts about the sacrament of penance and purgatory also dissociated himself from the penitence evoked by confession. He wanted more penitence, not less. His objective was to restore to the *contritio*, or the true, heartfelt repentance, the profundity and intensity which it had lost. Menno Simons and his followers did not interpret the Reformation as a lightening of the burdens of faith; as serious Christians they voluntarily accepted a much heavier yoke in order to inherit heaven. Menno Simons continued to be faithful to his original calling as a pastor. Where he was concerned, care for the future salvation of the souls of humankind was a stronger motive for his activities than the pursuit of socio-political utopias. It was irrevocable that his search for the strict biblical foundations of true penitence would lead to an uncoupling of the sacramental, sacerdotal mediation of salvation. He used the Bible as the only instrument to reinstate and shape the essence of late medieval penitential piety in all its simplicity and power. The consequence was that the value of the traditional sacerdotal mediation in salvation decreased and that the priest Menno Simons gradually changed into an anticlerical evangelical preacher of penitence. From then on, he derived his power and status not from his calling by the traditional church, but from the calling he received from God himself, whose voice could be heard most clearly in the Bible. It was as an evangelical preacher of penitence that he was best able to fulfill his original calling as a pastor.

From father confessor to preacher of penitence

The central themes of Menno Simons' reformational theology arise from his practice as a pastor and can best be explained in the

pastoral context. It is quite possible that a closer consideration of his task of preparing parishioners to make a perfect confession may offer more insight into Menno Simons' theology than an attempt to map out his possible relationship with official late-medieval theology. Menno Simons was not an academically-trained theologian, although this does not mean that he was stupid. He developed a new kind of practical theology from his pastoral experience, meant to give his contemporaries ultimate assurance of their future salvation and of the new life on earth based on biblical norms which granted entrance there. Two examples from pastoral practice will illustrate this development—the preparation for communion and for life's end.

Penitential books had an important place in the performance of his task as a father confessor. Although we do not know which book of penitence Menno used, we can easily deduce which themes it dealt with from the available penitential literature.[2] The penitential books served to assist the confessor in uncovering sins and determining the degree of punishment, the required works of satisfaction. At the same time, their guidelines give an insight into the moral standard of the everyday lives of believers. The norms for disciplining Christian society were derived from the high demands made of the apostolic life in a monastic setting, which had to be kept up to the mark by regular confession.

The traditional Christian preoccupation with sexuality is a prominent presence in most of the books of penitence. All irrational desires were regarded as the work of the devil. Every expression of sexuality whose objective was the fulfillment of desires instead of the reproduction of the human race within the legal framework of marriage was rejected as being unnatural. All expressions of homosexuality, sodomy, incest, adultery, and fornication were dealt with in detail and the corresponding penalty specified. We also find regulations indicating what kinds of food may or may not

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[2]Compare my '"Van ware penitencie." De kern van Menno Simons' theologie', *DB* 12-13 (1986-1987) 248-265; ('True Penitence: the Core of Menno Simons' Theology', *MQR* 62/3 (1988) 387-400). No specific Dutch handbooks for confessing were written in the Netherlands. The *Poenitentiale* by Petrus van Blois and the *Modus confitendi* by Raymundus de Peñafort enjoyed the greatest popularity. But other books of confession in general use also qualify, such as those by Johannes van Freiburg, Johannes Nider, Heinrich von Langenstein, and Andreas d'Escobar. See P. Michaud-Quantin, *Sommes de casuistique et manuels de confession au moyen âge (XII-XVI siècles).* Analecta Mediaevalia Namurcensia 13 (Louvain-Lille-Montréal, 1962); Rob Meens, *Het tripartite boeteboek. Overlevering en betekenis van vroegmiddeleeuwse biechtvoorschriften (met editie en vertaling van vier* tripartita) (Hilversum: Verloren, 1994).

be eaten, partly in connection with the commandments and prohibitions related to fasting. Penalties were specified for vomiting up the host during illness and for the excessive consumption of food and drink. Postponement of the baptism of a child or failure to have this done came under church discipline, as did abortion and infanticide. Non-Christian traditions and rituals, major sins and everyday sins—they all had to be brought to light by the priest, in order to induce deeply-felt contrition in the confessant in preparation for participation in communion.

We find many references in Menno's works to these abuses and wickednesses, although he derived the catalogue of sins directly from the Bible as much as possible. For Menno, the Bible became the new confessional mirror which had to replace the church's confessional books. The problem of penance naturally played a major role in the development of the disciplining of the Anabaptist congregations along biblical lines.

In the late Middle Ages, the *eschata*, the Last Acts, were one of the main themes of religious meditation. Death through illness, hunger, natural disasters and premature physical decline were everyday realities. The end of life and the fate of the soul determined the subject of devotional literature, sermons, plays about the Resurrection, the Anti-Christ, and the Last Judgement, *contemptus mundi* and *ars moriendi* writings, exemplum literature and visions. The layman was saturated with the *momento mori* in many ways.[3] The whole of life was regarded as the gradual process of dying. True religiosity consisted of *mortificatio*, an ascetic killing of the urge for self-preservation and of natural desires and appetites in preparation for the total submission to God. The degraded Christ served as the model for this process of dying and submission. *Mortificatio carnis* was the import of the *imitatio Christi*; the dying of sins being analogous to the suffering of Christ. There was no hope of being raised to a new life in Christ without this death and true penitence.

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[3]This eschatological consciousness was expressed in an insistent manner in the following lines of verse on the 'four extremes' (death, judgement, hell, and heaven): 'Bis duo sunt que cordetenus sub pectore misi:/ Mors mea, iudicium, baratri nox, lux paradisi.' ('Twice two things there are that I have engraved deep within the heart in my breast; my death, Judgement Day, the night of the abyss, and the light of paradise.') Quoted from Nigel Palmer, 'Die Letzten Dinge in Versdichtung und Prosa des späten Mittelalters', in *Deutsche Literatur des späten Mittelalters.* Hamburger Colloquium 1973, hrsg. von Wolfgang Harms und Peter Johnson (Berlin, 1975) 225-239; 226.

The final confession on one's deathbed and the subsequent absolution and communion were the culminating point of life on earth. The degree of perfection of this confession was a major determining factor in the length of the stay in purgatory. Thorough preparation for death comprised the most important part of spiritual care. Let us observe Menno Simons in the performance of this task. A parishioner who lives on a farm a few miles away from Pingjum is on his deathbed and one of his laborers has come to the parsonage with a request to hear the dying man's confession and to administer the last rites. Menno Simons sends for an acolyte and a few villagers to go with him. The acolyte is one of Menno's pupils; he walks ahead in his surplice and rings a bell to draw the attention of passers-by to the procession, so that they will kneel when the body of Christ passes by. The feet of those taking part in the procession and the knees of the kneeling passers-by sink into the mud of the dirt road leading from the village to the farm. Another assistant carries a burning lamp, the symbol of Christ as the everlasting light, even in broad daylight. This light precedes Christ himself, who is physically present in the host carried by Menno Simons in a pyx, a decorated box containing the host. Bringing up the end of the procession are a number of representatives of the parish who are just as aware as the priest of the responsibility they share for the welfare and salvation of their fellow villagers. And so the short procession with the viaticum for the dying man continues on its way under the high heavens through the flat and bare countryside. A salty tang is borne on the west wind, betraying the proximity of the sea. En route, the priest makes an estimate of the dying man's prosperity. How many masses to shorten his coming stay in purgatory can be included in the last will and testament of the dying man? Thus, even after their deaths, did parishioners continue to provide the daily bread of their priests.

However, the preparation for a perfect confession had already become less dependent on a priest in the course of the fifteenth century. In the late Middle Ages a great deal of religious literature was published in print in the vernacular, meant for a wide audience of monastics, semi-monastics (*conversos*), and laity.[4] What had originally been monastic piety became common property in a large circle of serious believers who meditated on the life to come with the aid of these 'do-it-yourself' instructions. This literature,

[4]See Th. Mertens, et al., *Boeken voor de eeuwigheid. Middelnederlands geestelijk proza* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1993).

sometimes in combination with catechetical elements and non-religious, sometimes anticlerical texts, was very often concerned with such themes as sin and confession. The texts were mirrors in which the individual believer could discover his sins and faults independently of a confessor, as well as the indications of a life which would be pleasing in the sight of God. This literary popularization of the original monastic-penitential piety determined the nature of the Reformation in the Netherlands to a great extent. The Anabaptist reformation too has its roots in this practical-experiential type of piety, characterized by the growing awareness of self-reliance and independence which distinguished the emergence and emancipation of the middle classes. In this religious literature which developed in the course of the fifteenth century, we encounter an ever-increasing occupation with the human being who must fight sin in great desolation, and who finds his only comfort in the solitary and suffering Christ. All of this was connected to a growing feeling of sinfulness and fear with apocalyptic tendencies.[5] This personal intensification of the awareness of penitence served originally as personal preparation for the sacramental mediation of salvation, but was not independent of it and did not render it superfluous.

This harmonious merging of personal devotion and sacramental mediation of salvation was cruelly disturbed however when, with references to the Bible, Erasmus and Luther unintentionally or intentionally fanned the feelings of doubt concerning the legitimacy of the traditional sacrament of penance. The consequence was that the role of the priest as the exclusive mediator of salvation became devalued, and that the individual believer seeking inner peace was forced more and more to resort to independent reading of the Bible as the only reliable confessional book. The earlier tendencies to internalization of religious life were reinforced again in this way, also where the convention of prayer was concerned. For example, a shift away from saying prayers aloud to praying in silence became apparent in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth

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[5]Fear due to sinfulness can stimulate feelings of hope and despair and can serve as an explanation for both the 'peaceful' and the 'revolutionary' aspects of the Anabaptist reformation. See Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture 13th-18th Centuries* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990) 555: 'Experienced positively, guilt creates tensions that can redeem the elite. These tensions can actively foster well-being, stimulate creative anxiety, help to develop a sense of responsibility, and also, thanks to introspection, open treasures locked up deep within ourselves. On the negative side, however, excessive fear as well as an excessively promoted language of guilt can paralyze, discourage and alienate.'

centuries. Anyone who prayed had to do so with all his heart; in which connection it should be noted that in the Middle Ages the heart was regarded as the center of the reason and not of the feelings.[6] It was no coincidence that silent prayer, both at home and in the assemblies of the congregation, became one of the characteristics of Mennonite orthopraxy. Menno's followers needed no one else for the most intimate conversation with God; they could conduct that themselves. Outsiders observing their silent prayers were amazed at the deep sigh which accompanied this most intimate of confessions before God.

The practical-experiential piety of the followers of Menno Simons is not a product of the Enlightenment or Pietism in the first instance, but can be traced back as far as late-medieval penitential piety. Their assemblies and devotional literature display all the characteristics of the *collationes* and *admonitiones*, as we know them from the tradition of the Modern Devotion. Bible texts which had been read were used by believers to admonish each other to avoid evil and aspire to good. Introspection, the discovery of one's own sinfulness, the development of true penitence, and the performing of good works were the main elements of religious exercises of this kind.[7] Academic theological meditations were lacking. The works of Menno Simons have a close affinity with this. It was also his objective to produce a moral theology which can be characterized as a biblically-grounded equivalent of the sermon and the catechism, as we encounter them in Middle Dutch devotional literature.[8] They were not intended to be works of literary beauty, but rather instructions for leading a life equal in form to Christ's. In the case of Menno Simons, this Christian lay ethic was also nurtured by Old Testament Wisdom literature (The Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiastes) and by the Christian tradition, which had a strong neo-stoic flavour.[9] Menno Simons owes tribute to this traditional, penitential lay piety, from which he is only distinguished by a greater, biblically-grounded, ethical rigorism.

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[6]See P. Saenger, 'Books of Hours and the Reading Habits of the Later Middle Ages', in R. Chartier, ed., *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1989) 141-173; 145-147.

[7]See A. M. J. van Buuren, 'Wat materien gheliken op sonnendage ende hoechtijde te lesen'. Het Middelnederlandse collatieboek van Dirc van Herxen', in Mertens, *Boeken voor de eeuwigheid*, 245-263.

[8]See A. Troelstra, *De toestand der catechese in Nederland gedurende de voorreformatorische eeuw* (Groningen, 1901) and *idem., Stof en methode der catechese in Nederland voor de Reformatie* (Groningen, 1903).

[9]See J. Reynaert, et. al., *Wat is wijsheid? Lekenethiek in de Middelnederlandse letterkunde* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1994) on this theme.

'Nochtans soo vele van Luthero geholpen' ('And yet owing so much to Luther')

When and how did Menno Simons' doubts about the traditional, sacramental mediation in salvation originate? He states in his autobiographical notes that he entered the service of the Roman Catholic church in 1524 as a vicar in Pingjum, the village where his father was born. Every time he celebrated mass in that same year, he was seized by the idea that the bread and wine were not the flesh and blood of Christ. For two years he did not dare to bring clarity to this burning question by means of independent Bible study, but in 1526 he decided to study the New Testament and quickly discovered that the church's teachings on the Lord's Supper were unbiblical.

Menno Simons attributes this liberation from his terrible fear and doubts to Martin Luther. The Wittenberg reformer had helped him by his conviction that it was not a mortal sin to break human injunctions, and that this did not therefore lead to the loss of eternal salvation. We must interpret this acknowledgment of Luther very loosely, however. The fact is that where Luther was concerned, the opinion that only biblical ordinances and commandments were authoritative did not refer to the doctrine of transubstantiation, but rather to the church's injunctions relevant to the compulsory annual confession and communion, the observation of the days of fasting, the celebration of saints' days, and the fulfillment of monastic vows, etc. While there is little further evidence of Menno's having read widely in Luther's writings, it is possible—although not probable—that Menno Simons derived this certainty directly from Luther's 'Von Menschenlehre zu meiden' (1522).[10] Martin

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[10]Cf. *Opera Omnia*, 468a: 'Luther writes in a book on human injunctions that anything pertaining to God and religion which is not commanded is thereby forbidden.' (*Complete Writings*, 514.) The book in question is Luther's 'Dasz Menschenlehren zu meiden sind, Begründung aus der Schrift' and 'Antwort auf Sprüchen, die man anführt, Menschenlehre zu stärken', *WA* 10, II, 73-92, a Dutch translation of which was published a year after it appeared (*WA* 10, II, 66). Luther's *Von dreyerley Weysze, menschen lere zu meyden* appeared in 1523 (separate edition from his 'Kirchenpostille' of 1522). See *WA* 10, I, 1, 725; 10, II, 62. Menno could have encountered similar ideas in *Dat ander deel van die Summa der Godliker schriftueren oft Duytscher Theologien* ([Antwerp: Niclaes van Oldenborch?], 1526), as did his later fellow elder Adam Pastor; see J. J. van Toorenenbergen, ed., *Het oudste Nederlandsche verboden boek* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1882) 210 ff. The printing history and contents of this appendix are contained in: J. Trapman, *De Summa der Godliker Scrifturen (1523)* (Diss. University of Leiden, 1978) 15 ff.; 121 (concerning Adam Pastor's familiarity with this book).

Luther stressed freedom, spontaneity, and absolution as the heart of confession. Menno Simons, who laid the full emphasis on the contrite habitude of the believer, could only agree in very small part with this vision of Luther's.

Following in the footsteps of his Wittenberg predecessor, Menno Simons considered the human injunctions to include, in the first place, the injunction that the faithful must confess at least once a year to the priest around Easter, and receive communion. The status of the priesthood was undermined by putting the traditional practice of confession into perspective in this way. The penitent believer went in search of other means of finding peace for his anxious conscience and obtaining certain salvation. What did the Bible mean by true penitence and how could this be achieved? Luther and Menno Simons had learned from Erasmus that Jesus' call to repentance in Matthew 3:2 (Vulgata: 'poenitentiam agite') did not refer to the church's sacrament of penitence, but that these words had to be interpreted as a call to a lifelong process of leading a pure life.[11] According to Luther, with his radicalization of the primacy of grace, this true evangelical penitence was not a precondition of faith but a consequence of it. It was not penitence, therefore, but faith which was the true key to receiving forgiveness of sins. Only when the believer had been freed from God's judgement by belief in the mercy of Christ could he show his true penitence in freedom by performing good works. After all, repentance ensued from the commandment, but faith ensued from the promise of the forgiveness of sins. In Luther's view, the commandment should not be emphasized too much without the promise.

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[11]For the following, see Voolstra, '"Van ware penitencie"', 248-265. ('True Penitence', 387-400.) *Idem*, 'Boetvaardigheid buiten de biechtstoel. De transformatie van het sacrament der boete in een evangelisch-doperse boetepraktijk', *DB ns* 19 (1993) 29-42. The conclusion of this latter article is as follows: 'The evangelical-Anabaptist reformation makes the *contritio interior* the precondition for an anti-clerical and anti-sacramentarian, semi-pelagian religious practice, which is characterized by the aspiration to freedom from sin and the performance of evangelical works in accordance with faith in Christ. True penitence on the part of both believers and servants of the church confers a biblical validity and effectiveness on baptism, communion and church as media of salvation. Strict discipline is intended to preserve the pure church as the place where assured salvation is to be found and the place where penitent religious conventions can be practiced. In this way, the content of belief remains traditional, although the form of belief is renewed in accordance with the biblical model. It was not the principle of the division between Church and State which constituted the most important impediment to the Anabaptists' ability to fulfill the role of public church, but the emphasis on true penitence and the corresponding aspiration to perfection.'

Menno Simons, however, was afraid that no real renewal of the life of the believer could be involved as a result of Luther's unilateral emphasis on the passive aspect of faith and by his reversal of the biblical sequence of penance and faith. And he saw the truth of this suspicion in the behavior of many of Luther's followers—it actually appeared as if they had also been freed from all obligations to obey the biblical commandments.[12] Menno makes less of a distinction between faith and penitence than Luther does. Anyone who does not show a visible change in his life may not call himself a believer according to Menno Simons—which means that, to him, true penitence remains one of the conditions for the determination of what believing actually implies. It is the core concept of his semi-pelagian doctrine of grace, which also governs his ideas on the true baptism, the true Lord's Supper, and the true ministry. The constant call to true penitence makes Menno Simons' theology into a landscape over which the sun in all its brightness cannot quite break through the low cloud.

Penance and restitution

But what was Menno Simons' interpretation of this evangelical confessional practice, and how was the call to true penitence heard in his times? The believer no longer had to go to a priest in order to confess. He turned directly to God or to his brothers in the faith in deeply-felt contrition. The call on the saints had had its day. Forgiveness of sins was received on the grounds of the merits of Christ. Christ was the only means of salvation. From now on, satisfaction existed in demonstrating the love of God and one's neighbor, in the belief which is effective in love and expressed in all the works of mercy inspired by Christ and the apostles. This put an end to the compulsory prayers, masses, pilgrimages, and penances which had made the church into a mercantile corporation trading in salvation.

Menno Simons confesses his past to God in one of the writings which he produced in the year of his break with Rome, his 'Meditation on Psalm 25.' It is a justification of his former life as a priest, addressed to his co-religionists who see in him their future

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[12]*Opera Omnia*, ('Meditatie Ps 25'), 166b: 'Sommige en roepen niet dan Genade, Geest en Christus. Vertreden evenwel de Genade dagelijks, sy bedroeven uwen Heyligen Geest, en kruycigen uwen Sone met haer ydel vleeschelijk leven.' (*Complete Writings*, 68: 'Some cry nothing but grace, Spirit, and Christ, but trample daily on Thy grace, grieve Thy Holy Spirit, and crucify Thy Son with their vain, carnal life, as is evident.')

leader. He wishes to show them how thoroughly he has broken with his past servitude to the false church, in order to be acceptable as their evangelical minister. Just as in the account of the life of a monastic, one section is always devoted to a vividly-colored description of the path from a secular life to conversion and entrance into the monastery, so does Menno Simons describe his exodus from the church which has gone to worldly ruin. He shows repentance for his obedience to human injunctions. His criticism of the church is accompanied by his anxiety for a world which is rushing helplessly and out of control towards its end as a result. Existential need, criticism of the traditional church, and care for the world form an indivisible unity. Inner and outer conversion can scarcely be distinguished from each other. After having led people into error as a priest, he now feels called upon to preach the true gospel to all erring souls, despite persecution and oppression. He had exposed his priesthood as false servitude by examining his reflection in God's word as in a mirror.[13]

The great consciousness of sin which rings through in Menno's writings must not be explained solely in terms of psychology or Pietism, however. It must also be interpreted in relation to his previous work as a priest and erring minister, because it is sorrow for the damaging or inadequate moral effects of his former priestly activities. Such priests cannot rightly be called Christians, according to Menno Simons. Being one of these priests who has been condemned by God, he can only be absolved and given a new future and mission by Christ, as Christ is encountered in the Bible. After his confession, Menno summarizes his new teaching as follows: 'I have taught nothing all along but true repentance, a dying unto our sinful flesh, and the new life that cometh from God.'[14]

The intention of this doctrine was the purification and intensification of the traditional conventions of penance. The desire, after all, was to use them to bring peace to the anxious conscience resulting from fear of God's judgement, and to discipline the congregation from a moral point of view. The sacrament of penance was both a means of care and of coercion. It was intended to restore

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[13]*Opera Omnia*, 167b: 'O lieve Heere, ick en hebbe myselven niet gekent, eer ik my in uwe Woord spiegelde.' (*Complete Writings*, 70: 'O dear Lord, I did not know myself until I viewed myself in Thy Word.' ['until I saw myself reflected in the mirror of Thy Word.' Translation by S.V.])

[14]*Complete Writings*, 80. (*Opera Omnia* 174a: 'Ik en hebbe aller dingen niet geleerdt dan een waerachtige boete, afstervinge ons sondigen vleeschs, en dat nieuwe Leven dat uyt Godt is.')

the constantly failing human being to his state of original obedience to God. Pastoral penitential conventions were usually termed *restitutio*,[15] a concept which referred to both the religious individual as well as the entire religious community. Inner change produced new external forms, the one inseparable from the other. True penitence led to the reinstatement of the pure and simple gospel from apostolic times—a longing which could be fostered by humanist utopias and dreams of a Golden Age. These longings made the *restitutio* a critical concept, against which worried believers could measure the decline of the church in their own times.[16] Once the Bible had been rediscovered as the only foundation for the building of the authentic church, and the laity had claimed the right to interpret and apply what they read in the Scriptures, the power of the scholastic theologians and the clergy disappeared like snow in summer. In the third decade of the sixteenth century—the decade of Menno Simons' reformational awakening—all emphasis was gradually being placed on the biblical authenticity of religion and the moral purity of believers. These were the two standards by which Menno Simons started to measure the church which he served as a priest. They also became the pillars of his biblical theology and rigorous morality.

Menno Simons and his contemporaries heard the proclamation of true penitence from the lips of the messengers from Melchior Hoffman and Jan Matthijs. These messengers had created fear among many believers with this threatening message and had persuaded believers to be re-baptized. Some of them had been dragged demonstratively through the streets of Amsterdam accompanied by raised swords and the cry of 'Do penance, do

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[15]See, for example, Erasmus in his 'Epistola ad Paulum Volzium', in: *Erasmus von Rotterdam, Ausgewählte Schriften*, I (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968) 6: 'In tanta aetatis fugacitate parato promptoque remedio est opus. Quot voluminibus praecipiunt de restitutione, de confessione, de votis, de scandalis deque aliis innumeris?' (Translation: 'In the fleeting transience of this world, an antidote is needed which can be consumed quickly. Have not countless books been written with prescriptions for penance [= *restitutio*], confession, vows, torments, and innumerable other questions?')

[16]Erasmus' explanation of the concept of restitution (Acts 3:21), is reflected (probably via Johannes Campanus' tract *Göttlicher und heilger Schrift Restitution und Besserung*) in the theology of Bernard Rothmann, but can also be found in other reformers, spiritualists, and Anabaptists, such as Hans Hut. According to Rothmann, all of history is a constantly failing aspiration to reinstate Creation before the Fall. God is making a new beginning with Luther, Zwingli and Erasmus, but this must be brought to fulfillment, however, by Melchior Hoffman, Jan Mattijs from Haarlem, and Jan van Leiden in Münster.

penance and repent';[17] an urgent call to break with false Christianity and a call full of prophetic self-assurance and apocalyptic threat. The time had now come for the radical decision and the great purification. Anyone who did not wish to risk his everlasting salvation had to break with the false church. Non-penitents had no promise of everlasting life.[18] They were forced to make a radical choice. The possibility of still receiving salvation after a long process of purification in purgatory was terminated. After all, purgatory was merely an invention of the Pope to extort money from the faithful.[19] Believers were now exposed to the high voltage of divine justice, which was no longer transformed into a weaker and tolerable voltage by the church. The images of hell and damnation on the altar piece were threatening to become reality.

No Gospel without the Law

Let us relate the penance problem to a theme which has received little attention as yet in the study of Anabaptist theology; namely the relationship between Law and Gospel. This concerns humankind's path to salvation in the widest sense of the term, and also bears on the relationship between Law and Grace, between the Fall or death and redemption. Many popular illustrations of this complex theme were produced during the Reformation to give believers insight into the reformational path to salvation.[20]

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[17]*DAN* 1,8: Obbe Philips concerning the actions of these 'sword bearers' in Amsterdam on 22 March 1534. Their demonstration is connected with the sending out of messengers from Münster, who also proclaimed their call to penitence in other cities. See *Flugschriften vom Bauernkrieg zum Täuferreich (1526-1535)*, II, ed. Adolf Laube (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1992) 1630-1632. Obbe Philips and his brother Dirk were baptized in Leeuwarden in January 1534 by three of these 'sword bearers'.

[18]*Opera Omnia* ('Tegen Gellius Faber'), 299a. (*Complete Writings*, 740.)

[19]One of the first testimonies of the rejection of purgatory was published a year before Menno Simons started to doubt the biblical legitimacy of the 'human inventions' of the Roman Catholic church. It was a tract by Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, *Ein Sermon vom stand der Christglaubigen seelen von Abrahams schosz und fegfeuer der abgeschidnen seelen* (Augsburg: Sigmund Grimm, 1523). Calvin Augustine Pater, *Karlstadt as the Father of the Baptist Movements: The Emergence of Lay Protestantism* (Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 1984) 249 ff. has Karlstadt's influence on Menno Simons run exclusively via Melchior Hoffman. Whether Karlstadt had a more direct influence in the Netherlands is worthy of further research, even if no explicit indications of this are to be found in the works of Menno Simons.

[20]A well-known example is the oil painting 'Gesetz und Genade', ('Law and Grace') attributed to Franz Timmerman; painted around 1540. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, WRM 3475. It is a symbolization of the central reformational Bible

The rediscovered Bible as the normative Word of God for the individual and society was experienced as both a threat and a liberation. Law and Gospel, God's demanding justice and forgiving mercy, were one and of equal weight in the spiritual interpretation of Menno Simons. The Word of God, as life-destroying Law, uncovered offences and condemned sinners and offenders. The Word of God, as life-bringing Gospel, pardoned the condemned and gave them the strength to lead sanctified lives. Menno speaks in expressive terms about this dual effect of the Word of God. The Law purifies the wounds like sour wine, and they are then healed by the curative oil of the Gospel.[21] Menno Simons compares Law and Gospel with the severe winter which causes Nature to die, and the mild spring which awakens dead Nature to new life.[22] The Law is like a deadly hammer which shatters the heart, while the Gospel consists of rays of fire lighting up the inner man.[23]

The analogy with confession and absolution is evident. Fear and love are created in the heart of the believer when God's word is preached and assimilated correctly, which is to say, as threatening Law and consoling Gospel. Superficial penitence from fear of the wrath of God (*attritio)* is transformed into sincere repentance engendered by love for God's forgiveness (*contritio).* Rebirth is brought about by both the Law and the Gospel. Where the fear of God and the love of Him are both present, then there is true penitence, according to Menno Simons.[24] He makes scarcely any distinction between true penitence and faith. For him, true penitence is the articulation of the true faith which changes people both internally and externally.[25]

True penitence and faith are therefore a process which constantly demands active human involvement.[26] As a consequence, Menno Simons is unable to follow Luther when the latter interprets faith unilaterally as the passive assimilation of God's forgiveness through Christ alone, thus purifying it of any form of human virtue and collaboration in the process of sanctification. Nor is Menno

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texts Rom. 3:20, 4:15; 1 Cor. 15:56, and John 1:29.

[21]*Opera Omnia* ('Tegen Gellius Faber') 249a. (*Complete Writings,* 656.)

[22]*Opera Omnia* ('Fundamentboek'), 68ab. (*Complete Writings,* 222.)

[23]*Opera Omnia* ('Tegen Gellius Faber'), 285a. (*Complete Writings,* 718.)

[24]*Opera Omnia* ('Tegen Gellius Faber'), 250a: 'Waer Godes vreese ende liefde zijn, daer is een ware boete.' (*In margine.*) Not in *Complete Writings,* 657.

[25]*Opera Omnia* ('Tegen Gellius Faber') 251a. (*Complete Writings,* 659.)

[26]The sinful man starting to act for himself and the virtues becoming human characteristics are also depicted in late medieval plays. See Herman Pleij, *Nederlandse literatuur van de late middeleeuwen* (Utrecht: HES, 1990) 197.

alone in this view. In general, the radicalism of Luther's doctrine of justification found little response in the Netherlands, where people were better-disposed to the ideas of the moderate Melanchthon, who did not consider the beginning of faith as the end of penance.[27] Menno is in agreement with Luther that the sinner is only justified by Christ, and not in part by church sacraments, ceremonies, and human works. But the belief which endorses this justification by grace alone must above all, according to Menno Simons, be a vigorous faith expressing true penitence and sincere love for God and one's neighbor.

Thus we see that the traditional practice of penitence and the effective doctrine of divine grace left a permanent mark on the theology of the ex-priest from Witmarsum. The reinstatement of the penitent in a state of grace, the justification of the sinner, is not unconditional.[28] Without contrition, without real penitence, there can be no absolution, which is no longer granted by the priest, however, but by Christ himself. Faith is a process of penitence and reformation of the life being led. Faith is not faith unless it becomes effective in love. And this love is principally a deed of obedience, besides being a creed and a fruit of trust. Love is also a commandment. Grace which fails to bring about any change in how life is lived is only cheap grace. Grace is not absolution alone, but also starting to behave as a liberated person. Law and Gospel, Law and Grace, penance and faith, justification and sanctification, God's work and human activity are closely interconnected in the theology of Menno Simons and are sometimes difficult to distinguish. His traditional, penitential piety is made to serve a practical objective, namely the raising of the evangelical quality of church and society, a renewal which demands obedience. No one can be blessed, according to Menno Simons, without faith, love, and obedience to

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[27]See Hans-Georg Geyer, *Von der Geburt des wahren Menschen. Probleme aus den Anfängen der Theologie Melanchthons* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965) 371-372. Melanchthon's view that penance is the precondition for faith just as faith is the accomplishment of penance, is to be found, for example, in the work of Joannes Anastasius Veluanus, Dutch reformer and contemporary of Menno Simons. For more information on him see G. Morsink, *Joannes Anastasius Veluanus. Jan Gerritsz. Versteghe. Levensloop en ontwikkeling* (Kampen: Kok, 1986) 66 ff.

[28]This applies to the whole of Dutch Anabaptism. See S. Hoekstra, B. z., *Beginselen en Leer der Oude Doopsgezinden, vergeleken met die van de overige Protestanten* (Amsterdam: P.N. van Kampen, 1863) 269: 'They regard Christian morality not as the reason by which salvation is earned (this they ascribe solely to the merits of Christ), but as a pre-condition for it. Yet by far the most important question for them is repentance or non-repentance rather than belief or unbelief, although the latter is also significant to the extent that it is the absolute pre-condition for the former.'

Jesus Christ. Christ's gospel is also Law.[29] No matter how perfect and new the re-born Christian may be, his permanent sinfulness and imperfect obedience keep him subject to the Law of Christ.[30] The temptations of perfectionism, to feel oneself above the Law like David Joris, or of Antinomianism, in Luther's footsteps, were only too familiar to Menno Simons, but his constant admonishments to true penitence show that he wishes to give them no room. The urgency was great; time was short and the Last Judgement was at hand.

Clerical self-hate and anticlericalism

So what is the best way to explain Menno Simons' break with the Roman Catholic church? Any possible explanation of his development from priest into lay preacher of penitence must do justice to the manner of his personal reaction to the processes of religious change with which he was confronted in his times, but we must also bear in mind the socio-political effects of those changes in the religious climate. Neither must we confuse essentials with side-issues, however, regardless of the significant extent to which the religious and social dimensions of faith constitute an indivisible unity. The principal concern of the early sixteenth-century believer was the existential-religious fear for the salvation of his soul. Life on earth was but a prelude to everlasting life and had to be made subservient to it. When the anxious believer turned away from the traditional church which could no longer provide certain salvation and started to search for a more solid foundation in the Bible, this change in power relationships also caused changes in the structure of society, were it only as a result of the fact that in those days religion and society, church and world appeared in one and the same form. It is only with some difficulty that we secularized citizens of the late twentieth century are able to imagine this medieval and early-modern fear of the Last Judgement and the craving for the certainty of salvation. And it is for this reason that we are more inclined to use social rather than theological methods to interpret the Reformation, because we think it will be easier for us to bridge the distance between the twentieth and sixteenth centuries from the perspective of current social utopias than from the perspective of ideas about the care of the soul as preparation for the life hereafter—ideas which are dated in our perception.

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[29]*Opera Omnia* ('Oorsake') f.447ab. (*Complete Writings*, 308-309.)
[30]*Opera Omnia* ('Weemoedige ontschuldinge') 509ab. (*Complete Writings*, 565.)

In the recent socio-historical approach to the Reformation, the concept of anticlericalism has been presented as an inclusive explanatory model of the third decade of the sixteenth century, when the Reformation was still going through its 'plastic phase'.[31] This socio-historical approach provides a valuable addition to a purely theological approach to the history of the Reformation, clearly showing the interaction and intermingling of theological causes and socio-political consequences. Sometimes the socio-historical approach struggles for primacy with a more theological one, so that it appears unintentionally as if the concept of anticlericalism can affect not only the development, but even the cause and essence of the Reformation.

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[31]See the book by the most important representative of this socio-historical approach, Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Pfaffenhass und gross Geschrei. Die reformatorischen Bewegungen in Deutschland 1517-1529* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1987) and his essay: 'Eine "bewegte" Epoche. Zur Heterogenität reformatorischer Bewegungen', in Günter Vogler, ed., *Wegscheiden der Reformation. Alternatives Denken vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfölger, 1994) 23-56. He receives support from James M. Stayer, 'Anticlericalism: A Model for a Coherent Interpretation of the Reformation', in *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte. Sonderband: Die Reformation in Deutschland und Europa: Interpretationen und Debatten*, Hans R. Guggisberg et al. eds. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993) 39-47. Stayer points out that Goertz does not claim that anticlericalism is the only interpretive model of the early Reformation (p. 45), although he does consider that Goertz does too little justice to the phenomenon of clerical self-criticism, 'he does not draw a clear line between clerical reputation and clerical reality.' (p.46)

Goertz also stuffs Menno Simons' life and teachings into a tight anticlerical straitjacket, and this sometimes leads to forced interpretations such as those regarding Christology, the doctrine of justification, and excommunication and shunning, which do insufficient justice to the effect of late medieval daily piety in the theology of Menno Simons. In this way anticlericalism, as a monocausal explanatory model of the early Reformation, appears to confer a new cohesion to Anabaptism which, from the viewpoint of a similarly strict socio-historical approach, has lost the innocence of its monogenetic beginnings and disintegrated into polygenetic factors. For his interpretation of Menno Simons see, *Die Täufer. Geschichte und Deutung* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1980) passim; and in particular, 'Der fremde Menno Simons', in *The Dutch Dissenters. A Critical Companion to their History and Ideas*, Irvin B. Horst, ed. Kerkhistorische Bijdragen XIII (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986) 160-176. For a recent evaluation of the anti-clericalism research, see Peter A. Dykema and Heiko A. Oberman, eds., *Anticlericalism in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, LI (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993). This collection also includes an article by Goertz, '"What a tangled and tenuous Mess the Clergy is!" Clerical Anticlericalism in the Reformation Period' (pp. 499-519), in which he tries to do more justice to the existential causes of anticlericalism. Relevant to Menno Simons, for example, he makes the following comment, 'Anticlericalism is a remembrance of a fundamental biographical rupture.' (p.513)

We hear anticlerical complaints not only at the time of the Reformation, but also in the preceding centuries. They were expressions of fear for the soul's salvation and of worries about the quality of the mediation in salvation performed by the church. This resistance might be directed against the hierarchical structure of the church and its misuse of power, or against the base morality of the clergy and their monopoly on salvation. This moorland fire had been smouldering for centuries, and at the time of the Reformation very little fuel was needed to make it flare up. We must distinguish several forms of anticlericalism—the laymen complained about the clergy (and vice versa!), the lower clergy opposed the higher clergy, and the clergy could come to hate itself.

Menno Simons had few problems with anticlerical feelings against his person on the part of parishioners. He was a respected priest, originating from and chosen by fellow-countrymen from his immediate surroundings and practically independent of episcopal authority. As a Frisian among Frisians he can at most have been critical of the substantial tracts of land owned by the monasteries. As a result, Menno Simons' break with the Roman Catholic church must be explained in the first place by his growing clerical self-hate. The father confessor who was supposed to use the confessional books to help his parishioners achieve self-knowledge, himself became a penitent when he saw himself reflected in the new confessional mirror of the Bible. It was there, encouraged by reformational noises which had penetrated his district, that he discovered the true penitential life which he would proclaim in his parish through his preaching and, after 1536, in his writings.

It was no sudden conversion, but rather a process lasting more than ten years and consisting of several phases—ignorance, rumors of reform, growing doubts and uncertainty, Bible study, self-criticism, criticism of Christianity, cautious internal church reforms, Anabaptist influences, resistance and then surrender to these, break with the traditional church, call to the leadership. It was only in his role of persecuted apologist and leader of the Anabaptist movement that Menno Simons' anticlericalism became virulent. The cause of this was, in the first place, the merciless persecution of the Anabaptists by the authorities, with the actual or tacit support of both Catholic and Protestant clergy.[32] Menno Simons'

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[32]See Alistair Duke, 'The Netherlands' in A. Pettegree, ed. *The Early Reformation in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 142-165: 165: 'In so far as the early Reformation in the Low Countries can lay claim to be distinctive, it derives from the prolonged exposure of dissidents in the Netherlands to persecution. It was this experience that drove a wedge between evangelicals in the Low Countries and

later anticlerical utterances expressed his resentment of the old and new clergy who, with all their differences in insight, had one thing in common—that they were able to attack the true church of the Anabaptists from a position of safety and comfort. Menno Simons' fierceness against the hostile clergy may appear strange to us liberal advocates of tolerance, but what appears strange to us actually inspired his persecuted co-religionists to have confidence in him. Furthermore, his criticism was not directed exclusively against the clergy, but equally against the authorities and the common people; in short, against the totality of false Christianity which did not fulfill the apostolic ideal of true penitence in the eyes of Menno Simons, and which persecuted the true penitents.

True penitence and Mennonite piety

True penitence may be regarded as the germ cell of a type of piety which characterized the followers of Menno Simons for centuries. We find this piety to comprise a mixture of experience, common sense, and decisiveness, which can be interpreted as the articulation of true penitence, the rationalist Bible interpretation, and the concept of efficacious grace. The precedence of a penitent life above the doctrine professed continues to be well-expressed in the baptismal liturgy of the Mennonite congregations until well into the eighteenth century. Before the persons to be baptized were asked to confess their sins, to witness to their deliverance by Christ, and to confirm their fidelity to the doctrine and life of the church, they were called to true penitence by the minister or elder in an emotive speech or prayer. It was an admonition to 'search the deep hiding places of their deceitful hearts'. A living sorrow towards God was set in motion, not to fall into despair, but to direct one's eyes to the virtues of Christ. It was this unity of penance and faith which was urged on novices.[33]

If true penitence, the experiential nature of faith and self-criticism decline, then the development of an external and legalistic practice of religion is possible. This has led to considerable discord among the followers of Menno Simons in the course of history. It proved simpler to hold up the Bible in front of another as a confessional mirror, than to allow oneself to be moved to true penitence by that same Bible. Having learned from bitter experience, later

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their counterparts in Germany and helped to mold the structures of dissent.'

[33]See Simeon Frederik Rues, *Tegenwoordige Staet der Doopsgezinden of Mennonten in de Vereenigde Nederlanden* (Amsterdam: F. Houttuyn, 1745) 46-47; 130-131.

generations with their rejection of all external factors which could lead to dissension finally also relinquished true penitence as the core of Mennonite piety. Without an understanding of the central role of true penitence in the theology of Menno Simons, it has not become easy to interpret Menno Simons' vision of a Christian life. Without affinity with this penitential type of faith, we can only speak in terms of a partial actualization of the theology of Menno Simons.

Chapter 3

The real presence of Christ: The congregation of true penitents

The fertile Frisian coastal area, which is where Menno Simons came from, is characterized by innumerable Romanesque churches with saddlebacked steeples. They are built on mounds, as a precaution against possible flooding by the sea, which is lying in wait to reclaim the land stolen from it. Today, if you were to visit Pingjum, the village where Menno Simons commenced his religious career as a vicar, you would find few reminders of his times. Only the stone church building has been preserved and it still stands there like a beacon in the flat, green landscape. The silhouette of the church and its tower make the village recognizable as Pingjum. In Menno Simons' day, however, this church was more than a refuge for the village dwellers during floods or a landmark for travelers. It was, in fact, the magical center of the parish, and the material prosperity and spiritual welfare of those living in the vicinity depended on it. It was in the church that the prayers for the healing of the illnesses which struck humankind and animals were said, and the prayers for a good harvest or peace in the country. The consecrated bell was rung to ward off disaster and to call the faithful to the religious duties which guaranteed that salvation would be obtained. Water and oil, bread and wine, received their supernatural powers in this building.

Nowhere was the divine presence more tangible than in the host. God's son was shown to the faithful in the form of a circular piece of bread, so that they could adore him. At least once per year the parishioners themselves shared physically in the divine qualities by partaking of the body of Christ in a consecrated wafer. There were those who smuggled the host they received out of the church as precious medicine for a weak relative or a sick cow. But it was not only its salutary effect with a view to time and eternity that made the Eucharist an important sacrament—it was also the mark of the identity of the Roman Catholic church. The celebration of the Eucharist was a universal sign of recognition throughout the Christian Occident, right into the remotest corners and tiniest hamlets. Every place where mass was celebrated by a priest was

bound by the invisible ties of the apostolic succession to Rome, the predominant magical center of the Christian world.[1]

In the third decade of the sixteenth century, the increasing doubts concerning the reality of Christ's physical presence in the Lord's Supper prompted a drastic reconsideration of the question of where divine reality could be experienced, if it was not tied to matter. Faith in the magical effects of the traditional means of salvation was waning.[2] Until then, the sacred was to be found in the profane; the spiritual in the material, so that divine power was predominantly sealed in the sacraments and the holy objects of worship, where it was experienced as a power which could forgive, punish, protect, heal, and perform miracles. And yet, no sacred substances like water and oil, no sacred cult objects such as statues and reliquaries, had a magical power equal to the consecrated elements of bread and wine. Because the cup was denied the laity, the host represented for the faithful the supreme magical means of communication with the divine. God descended into this 'bread of life' in a hidden and invisible manner, as a continuous incarnation and a constantly repeated sacrifice.

It is not easy for us either to comprehend or describe adequately the magical power ascribed to the host. The supernatural came within everyone's reach in this disc of bread. By partaking of this body of Christ, the communicant was made identical in form to

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[1]In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Eucharist became the most important element in a new symbolic order, with not only personal, but also social and political implications. See Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi. The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 348: 'In this new order we witness the raising of a fragile, white, wheaten little disc to amazing prominence, and fallible, sometimes ill-lettered, men to the status of mediator between Christians and the supernatural. The eucharist emerged as a unifying symbol for a complex world.'

[2]The authoritative work in the discussion of the 'de-magicalization' of reality is still Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Hammondsworth, 1973), although its points of departure and conclusions have not remained unchallenged. His fundamentally rationalistic attitude made the author somewhat blind to the permanent role of religion in the sixteenth and later centuries and he is too much inclined to regard any criticism of magical thinking as the beginning of the end of religious consciousness as such. Doubts as to the magical nature of the Lord's Supper did not mean that its religious significance was lost to the reformers, but that its meaning was changed, purified, and intensified. For a comparable critique see Margaret Spufford, 'The importance of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', in *idem*, ed., *The World of Rural Dissenters, 1520-1725* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 1-102; 98: 'But the religious meaning of the Lord's Supper, which survived not only in theological teaching but in the minds, and more importantly, the feelings, of believers . . . was not comprehended within this "magical" definition, and was not therefore lost with it, either.'

Christ; he participated in his future bliss during his earthly existence. His mortal body in all its temporality and imperfection was transformed already into the glorified body of the resurrected Christ. It was not as the proclaimed message of forgiveness of sins and victory over death that Christ constituted the foundation of the church, but in the form of the consecrated bread. No wonder then that no means of guarding the sacramental presence of the divine were abhorrent to this church. Where could God be encountered, enjoyed, and worshiped in a more concrete and tangible form than in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper? Every form of criticism of this sacramental interpretation of the divine presence undermined the foundation of the church and was regarded as heresy or atheism.

As a consequence, the change in Menno Simons' belief in the presence of the sacred in the profane and his post-Sacramentarian alternative for transubstantiation deserve further analysis. We would like first of all, to touch briefly on the consequences which the changing ideas about the relationship between the natural and the supernatural had on Menno Simons' reinterpretation of the Eucharist. There are three central questions in this connection; namely the nature of the Eucharist, the role of the server, and the worthiness of the partaker. His primary responsibility for the liturgy and the care of souls[3] led the vicar of Pingjum to the gradual realization that the actualization of the incarnation could not be confined to the magical transformation of bread and wine into the

[3]Friesland numbered approximately 1000 priests to 100,000 inhabitants at the start of the Reformation. The secular clergy had no educational institute of its own in this province, and had therefore to rely on renowned schools in Groningen, Deventer, or Zwolle, or on elementary education in a Latin school, as was probably the case with Menno Simons. The parish of Pingjum had at its disposal a priest, a vicar ('jongerpriester' or apprentice priest), and a canon or prebendary, all of whom had enjoyed a limited education according to Menno Simons himself. They were recommended by the local lay patrons (mostly the landowners in a parish) from known candidates (Menno Simons' father was born in Pingjum). Their most important task was attending to worship. In a small church like Pingjum, the office, High Mass, and the benediction would not have been sung daily, but certainly on the four feast days (Christmas, Easter, Whitsun (Pentecost), and Assumption) and mostly on ordinary Sundays too. This was the particular task of the vicars, 'de heren van de zeven getijden' (the lords of the seven offices). The priest was assisted by the vicar in his main task of spiritual care, which included administering the sacraments, religious education, and occasionally a half-hour long sermon—much shorter in Friesland than elsewhere in the Netherlands. The canon was specifically responsible for reading the 'masses to order', such as masses for the souls of the deceased and votive masses. See H. Oldenhof, 'Van Reformatie tot Revolutie', in E. Bruna, et al., eds., *Bijdragen tot de Kerkgeschiedenis van Friesland* (Franeker: T. Wever, 1951) 53-93.

flesh and blood of Christ, but that its real significance was the transformation of the heart of the believer. True penitence as the real nature of the sacrament of penance became, for Menno Simons, the most important framework for interpreting the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. After a sketch of his changing ideas in the course of the third decade of the sixteenth century, we will give an account of his search for the true nature of the Lord's Supper. All this is done in the realization that the change in the ideas and practice relating to the Lord's Supper was the most radical expression of reformational inclinations. It was not until six or seven years after his initial doubts about transubstantiation that Menno Simons was surprised to be confronted with a new baptismal convention in which true penitence was likewise constitutive rather than the magical power of the water. We will finally attempt to throw some light on the question of whether, and in what sense, Menno Simons may be described as a Sacramentarian priest.

God is Spirit; worship is spiritual

Menno Simons lived in a time in which many serious believers replaced the religion of immanence with the religion of transcendence. In the second decade of the sixteenth century, Catholic piety, with its sometimes exaggerated focus on outward forms of devotion, was being criticized by an increasing number of clergy and laity as idolatry or false religion. But where was divine reality to be found when the adoration and glorification of images, relics, and the host were being denounced as false religion? The Anabaptists were among the image breakers, together with the Zwinglian and Calvinist Reformed.[4] They made a distinction between the material and spiritual worlds and pleaded for exclusively spiritual worship. They differed from the Lutherans in

[4]The Anabaptist rejection of idolatry and participation in iconoclasm is not dealt with in *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), the study by Carlos M. N. Eire. Too little attention is paid to Anabaptism in the Netherlands in the fourth and fifth decades of the sixteenth century, as a result of the exclusive use of the study by Phyllis Mack Crew, *Calvinist Preaching and Iconoclasm in the Netherlands 1544-1569* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) and the question of the affinity between later Calvinism in the Netherlands and the Anabaptist pioneers (including the Münsterite image breakers) is not raised and therefore not clarified. The recent study by Lee Palmer Wandel, *Voracious Idols & Violent Hands: Iconoclasm in Reformation Zürich, Strasbourg and Basel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) contains only a few references to pre-Anabaptist image breakers in Zürich and the surrounding area.

this respect, since the Lutherans did not found their theology on the distinction between matter and spirit, and consequently did not reject the physical presence of Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper so comprehensively. The Anabaptists and the Reformed, with their biblically-derived rejection of the image cult and emphasis on the spiritual and transcendent nature of God, were seeking new points of departure for the redefinition of what was sacred. An important role in this process was played by the metaphysical dualism between matter and spirit; the product of Renaissance neo-Platonism. This is shown, for example, in the sharp delineation of visible and invisible reality using the paired concepts of sign and symbol (*signum et significatum*) and body and spirit (*caro et spiritus*). God was Spirit and worship was a spiritual thing. Freed of the sacramental material reality, and consequently no longer subject to manipulation by the priesthood, God was a spiritual and transcendent power asking for direct admittance to the inner being of the believer during spiritual worship.

The Anabaptists shared this spiritualistic religion with the Zwinglian and Calvinist Reformed. Had the role of the sacraments, including baptism and the Lord's Supper, not been played out? Was spiritualism not the most logical consequence of the Reformation? All that prevented them from accepting the extreme consequence of this spiritual worship by discarding baptismal water and communion bread and wine as outward means of salvation was their great respect for the commanding nature of the biblical message, in addition to the opinion that the sacramental signs were an extra guarantee for the mediation of the salvation mediated by the proclamation.[5]

However, spiritualization of religion in the sixteenth century did not lead to belief being put into perspective, but rather to its

[5]We continue to encounter either a wide or a narrow definition of the concept of 'spiritualism'. The entire Anabaptist and Zwinglian-Calvinist Reformed Reformation can be classified as 'spiritualist'. The Roman Catholics can rightly describe the subjectivism of the sacred throughout the entire Reformation as a spiritualization of belief which had been taken too far. 'Spiritualism' has therefore become such a wide concept that it explains virtually nothing. It could equally well be replaced by similarly vague designations like 'neo-Platonic', 'biblical-humanistic', or 'Renaissancist'. I would therefore argue in favor of the use of the concept of 'spiritualism' within the context of the Reformation to refer only to those movements in which all outward forms of devoutness—thus including baptism, the Lord's Supper, and external church discipline—had become devalued, and the inner self alone was the object of concentration, such as is the case with Schwenckfeld and Franck, (the later) David Joris and Obbe Philips for example, and their kindred spirit Coornhert.

intensification. The Reformation was not preceded by a time of decline in piety, but by a time during which piety intensified, among the common people as well. The Reformation conferred many new forms on this late-medieval intensification of piety, cleansed of human fabrications with the aid of the Bible. But why was this purification of piety necessary? Late-medieval piety involved a fragmentation of supernatural power over numerous material objects which mediated the divine presence. Serious believers experienced an increasing lack of direct and concentrated communication with the divine, who could provide the fiercely-sought certainty of salvation. The Reformation can be explained as a reaction to the exaggerated manner in which people believed in the objective and fragmentary presence of the divine in material elements.

It is true that reformatory criticism of the externality of religion did show some affinity with similar criticism which had been audible in circles of the Modern Devotion, the Lollards, and the Hussites in the previous century. Direct links are difficult to make, however, although a continuing effect filtered through time cannot be denied. Menno did not revert to the critical voices from previous centuries in his doubts concerning the miracle of the mass; he responded exclusively to all the sometimes diffuse and confused rumors about reformers and reforms which reached him in the second and the third decade of the sixteenth century. This means that the most fruitful interpretation of the life and work of Menno Simons will be one which is based on the spiritual climate of the early Reformation in the Netherlands. And who determined that spiritual climate more than Menno Simons' contemporary and fellow-countryman Erasmus, critical heir of the piety of the Modern Devotion and inspiring propagandist for a type of piety which bore clear traces of a New Testament interpretation with neo-Platonic tinges, and of the 'simple' theology of the early Church Fathers.[6]

The work of Erasmus displays many aspects which we also encounter in the ideals of Anabaptism and in the work of Menno Simons. Fundamental to the work of Erasmus is his longing to restore Christianity to its original, primitive, apostolic purity in

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[6]Menno Simons shows much evidence of affinity with and dependence on Erasmus. This has been demonstrated convincingly by C. Augustijn, 'Erasmus and Menno', *MQR* 60 (1986) 497-508; and *idem*, 'Der Epilog von Menno Simons', *Meditation*, 1539 (Leringhen op den 25. Psalm); Zur Erasmusrezeption Menno Simons", in Jean-Georges Rott & Simon L. Verheus, eds., *Anabaptistes et dissidents au XVIe siècle* (Bibliotheca Dissidentium: Scripta et Studia 3) (Baden-Baden & Bouxwiller: Editions Valentin Koerner, 1987) 175-188.

doctrine and existence. For this reason, the concept of rebirth which we frequently find with various designations (*renascentia, regeneratio, restitutio*) in Erasmus and Menno must not be interpreted in the narrow Pietist sense alone. It refers to a religious renaissance of both the individual believer and the whole of Christendom, which can be brought about through an authentic explanation of the teachings of Christ (*philosophia Christi*). Where Erasmus was concerned, the instruments for carrying out this program were the writings of the New Testament and the early Church Fathers, mindful of the humanist adage 'back to the sources' (*ad fontes*). Menno certainly used one of the many editions of Erasmus' Latin translation of the New Testament which, for Menno, formed the most important source of his theology together with the Vulgate translation of the Old Testament.[7] He had acquired some knowledge of the early Church Fathers via Sebastian Franck's *Chronica*, so that he could use this historical information on the simple, Christocentric worship of the early church as a weapon in his attack on the non-biblical doctrine and practices of the Roman Catholic church of his own times.

Nevertheless, Erasmus' own criticism of many church practices did not lead him to actual plans for reformation, but where Erasmus had ploughed others could harvest. The ambiguity and elitist nature of his intellectualist critique prevented him from becoming a reformer himself. But as an erudite interpreter of a contemporary, primitivistic, biblicist, and neo-Platonic type of piety, Erasmus unmistakably also touched chords in Menno, particularly regarding the internalization and spiritualization of religion; biblically legitimized with a reference to the dualism in John and Paul, where letter and flesh are made secondary to the spirit in a neo-Platonic manner (John 6:63; 2 Cor. 3:6). Without totally denying the value of outward religion, this led to an emphasis on the primacy of the spirit over matter, the result being that the traditional, outward forms of worship became subject to criticism and that their value was measured according to the

[7]See Augustijn, 'Epilog "Meditation"', 180. It is not clear whether Menno Simons commenced his independent Bible study in 1526 with the aid of an edition of Erasmus' Latin translation of the New Testament. K. Vos, 'Een zeldzaam Nieuw Testament', *Nederlandsch Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, XII/4 (1916) points out the possibility that Menno originally used a translation of the New Testament into the vernacular and inspired by Erasmus (Adam Pastor notes that Menno used 'the Testaments and Low German translations by Erasmus'), the particular edition being that of Govaert vander Haghen (Antwerp, 1525).

degree to which they were instrumental as tools for the deepening of inner devotion.

But besides correlations, there are also major differences between the humanist from Rotterdam and the vicar from Pingjum, especially where the interpretation of the Bible was concerned. Their ways part, for example, on the explanation of the fundamental concepts of flesh and spirit. Erasmus wishes to use this distinction to show that true religion can only be realized by turning away from the visible things and focusing on the invisible reality which corresponds to the highest element in human nature, and that is the spirit. Ideas of this kind can only result in existing worship being put into perspective, not to its reform; in fact they even lead to the human nature of Christ being put in perspective. Christ is not so much God who has become flesh and changes the structure of material reality by so doing. His incarnation was only of a temporary nature and serves solely to show people the direction of spiritual reality. Christ is exemplary in guiding humankind from the visible to the invisible reality.

Menno Simons, in contrast, gives faith a much more biblicist-moralist charge. For him, flesh means disobedience to the divine commandments primarily, while he interprets spirit as obedience and subjection to the Word of God. The divine presence moves from the visible objects of devotion in the church, to the inner being of the believer, particularly the center of the will. The fact that God will be working his purpose there from now on is proved by true penitence— the outward manifestation of the fact that God dwells within the believer. This also has consequences for Christology. For Menno Simons, incarnation is the residence of Christ in the hearts of believers and the transformation of individuals who were not obedient to God into a people subject to God in obedience. The divine presence should not be sought in the host (as in Roman Catholic doctrine), nor in the written symbols of Scripture or the impenetrable heavenly spheres to which these letters refer (as in Erasmus), but rather in the congregation of true penitents. The sanctified life of this congregation constitutes living and visible proof of the real presence of Christ. Grace which fails to bring about moral improvement is no grace. This is what Menno Simons wishes to express in his doctrine of incarnation, in spite of all the misplaced claims of docetism and monophysitism made by his opponents. Only the belief in Christ's freedom from sin can produce believers who aspire to freedom from sin.

Changing insights concerning the Eucharist, the communicant, and the celebrant

Which traditional ideas about the Eucharist were dismissed by Menno Simons? In the first place, he followed Luther in his rejection of the idea that the sacrifice of Christ was repeated by the priest during mass. In the second place, he showed himself to be a kindred spirit of what were known as the Sacramentarians, with their denial of the physical presence of Christ in the consecrated elements of bread and wine, and their rejection of the adoration of the host. And in the third place, he challenged the misapprehension that the sacrament as such could take away sins in a magical way. The background to this critique was the strong emphasis on transcendence and the spiritual character of divine reality. The workings of God and Christ, not bound to dead matter, were exclusively perceptible in the inner experience and outward obedience of believers.

The Eucharist.

From where did priests derive their great power? This was what Menno and many of his contemporaries wondered. Their power came from the doctrine that Christ, who resided in heaven, was locally bound to bread and wine during daily mass, and that Christ's sacrifice for our sins was repeated by the priest. This was in conflict with what the Bible said about the unicity and perfection of Christ's sacrificial death and with the fact that he, seated at God's right hand, ruled the world from heaven in a direct and spiritual manner and could therefore not be manipulated by 'a sinful, ungodly priest with a bit of bread'.[8] In the course of his gradual reformation of the liturgy of the mass, Menno Simons will have discarded the custom of breaking the host—the body of Christ—into three pieces, signifying the tripartite power possessed by the priest to reconcile God, the world, and the soul by sacrificing

[8] *Opera Omnia* ('Fundamentboek') 29b. (*Complete Writings*, 151.) In the discussion of Menno Simons' ideas on the Lord's Supper, reference is made specifically to the earliest expression of these in his 'Fundamentboek', ed. H. W. Meihuizen (1539/1540) 92. For the reader's convenience, reference is also made occasionally to parallel passages from the second edition of this work in 1558, only the text of which is included in the *Opera Omnia* and the *Complete Writings*.

Christ again.[9] Franck's *Chronica* provided Menno with the required evidence that even emperors had to bow to this abuse of power.[10]

From this same compendium, Menno Simons was able to gather the information on Augustine's explanation of St. John 6, the most important place of proof for the idea that Christ is not eaten physically but spiritually.[11] St. John chapter 6 is central to the spiritual interpretation of the Lord's Supper by the Sacramentarians. Christ's presence is exclusively spiritual in nature; a piece of bread and a mouthful of wine cannot be transformed into God's everlasting Son. His words are spirit and life; it is useless to eat his physical flesh. He cannot be chewed by the teeth of humankind, cannot be digested by a human stomach; fire, moths, worms, mice, and rats can have no effect on Christ. The invisible soul of the believer cannot be nourished with visible bread, and the visibly created reality of bread and wine cannot be transformed into the spiritual, invisible Son of God. Only like can be eaten by like; the spiritual human being can only communicate with a spiritual Christ. True communication and unity with Christ is only possible in the place where a congregation is gathered in true faith and brotherly love, with obedience to the Bible and a correct use of the sacrament, which is to say in two forms.

It is as if we hear Luther speaking when Menno Simons stipulates that the forgiveness of sins can only be effected by preaching the promise of the forgiveness of sins through Christ alone. Christ is the only means of sanctification to Menno Simons. He is the unique master of healing who offers his services free of charge, unlike the

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[9]*Ibidem.* Before 1529 (see *Fundament (1539/1540)* 70-71; *Opera Omnia*, 21b: 'Predikers van Norlingen'; read 'Nordlingen'; cf. *Complete Writings*, 132: 'preachers at Nordlingen') Menno Simons became acquainted with two writings by the reformationally-inclined priests of the German town of Nördlingen, including *Von der Evangelischen Messz. Mit schönen Christlichen Gebetten vor und nach der empfahung des Sacraments. Durch Caspar Kantz von Nördlingen* [1522]. The custom of breaking the host in three on the seventh entreaty of the Lord's Prayer ('deliver us from evil') is omitted from one of the two editions of this tract. The annotated text can be found in Emil Sehling, ed., *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts.* XII. Band: Bayern, II. Teil: Schwaben (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1963) 285-288; see 286, n.7 in particular.

Adriaan Pieterz., an Anabaptist, was condemned to death by beheading on 12 May 1534 because he had denied that God was present in the sacrament and that the host would bleed if the priest were to break it into three pieces during mass. He subsequently offered to cleave 50 hosts ('Goeden' ['gods']) with a dagger. If they bled he would embrace the old faith again. *DAN*, V, 40.

[10]*Fundament*, 93. (*Opera Omnia*, 30a; *Complete Writings*, 152.)

[11]*Fundament*, 97; Franck, *Chronica* (1536) III, 113 verso. (*Opera Omnia*, 31b; *Complete Writings*, 155.)

priest. Those who pursue salvation by other means, by attaching faith to indulgences, holy water, fasting, confessing, masses, pilgrimages, infant baptism, and Eucharist, are denying Christ. They are pursuing self-will and not the only righteousness which matters to God—obedience to his commandment.[12] The Word of God, in both the Old and New Testaments, is the sole canon and the sole scepter with which the life of a Christian must be weighed and governed. Only through the word of Christ is the Christian governed spiritually and inwardly.[13] It does indeed seem that we hear Luther speaking, but the emphasis on the Word has a different intent for Menno Simons. As is the case with Luther, the Scriptures do not only contain the Word as the promissory message of the forgiveness of sins; but where Menno Simons is concerned, the Bible is no less the ultimate norm for Christian life. Without obedience to the literal normativeness of the Bible the believer cannot claim participation in the Spirit, is how we may interpret Menno Simons' vision of the Scriptures as the Word of God. Obedience to the Bible as a norm may sometimes hinder the hearing of the promise of forgiveness, however, which is the reverse side of Anabaptist biblicism and legalism.

By turning away from the objective aspects of the Eucharist (the rejection of the *ex opere operato)* and turning towards the subjective ones (the inner assimilation of sanctification), Menno Simons' attention shifts to the questions concerning the true use, the true users, and the true servers of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The degree of inner experience of God's righteousness and love in Christ, and of outward obedience to the Word of God becomes the determining factor in a true celebration of the Lord's Supper. The optimum efficacy of this sacrament is made to depend on the intentions of the servers and the users. This new donatism is the logical consequence of the spiritualization and subjectivization of salvation. Is it not true that the grace of God does not work through dead matter, but in living hearts and obedient lives? But just what is the true nature and correct form of the biblically-legitimate celebration of the Lord's Supper according to Menno Simons, in contrast to traditional ideas about the Eucharist?

There stands Menno Simons the priest, behind the altar. He shows the host to his parishioners and utters the Latin words of institution in a Frisian accent, *'Hoc est enim corpus meum'*, which must transform the bread into the body of Christ. But doubt is

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[12]*Fundament*, 100-104. (*Opera Omnia*, 32a-33b; *Complete Writings*, 156-158.)

[13]*Fundament*, 106: 'Uno Christi verbo regitur Christianus interne' (*In margine*).

eating away at him—he does not believe that a miracle is taking place in his hands. We must try to imagine in how much fear and trembling Menno Simons took leave of the traditional interpretations of the Eucharist. The fact was that his ideas on the spiritual nature of Christ's presence in earthly reality led to an enormous reduction of the effect of God's grace, to the extent that this was bound to creaturely elements such as water, oil, bread, and wine. People also believed that the host influenced not just the soul, but also the body. In contrast to normal fare, the heavenly food did not change inside a human body and did not take on human substance. No, exactly the opposite took place; the heavenly bread, the body of Christ, which was not subject to transformation and decay, changed humankind within itself.[14]

The communicant.

The communicant's awe of the host was just as great as the celebrant's fear; the pure body of Christ disappeared into the filth of the human digestive system. Fasting before communion prevented the heavenly bread from coming into contact with food which had been produced by the earth. The body of Christ was offered, consumed, and destroyed for the second time by the natural warmth in the stomach. In this way, the host gave protection against illness and disaster, the Devil and death. There were, however, grounds for fearing that the sacrament would lose all efficacy when the perfect analogy between the spiritual and the material, between the beneficial effects of eating the host and participation in the supernatural divinity, was given up. Menno Simons therefore replaced the host as sacramental medicine by the direct care of Christ as the spiritual master of healing. It was Christ himself who should be adored, not the host.[15] God's love was no longer received through the stomach, but via the ear into the hearts of the believers. But what significance was still to be attached to the Lord's Supper?

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[14]See Piero Camporesi, *The Fear of Hell: Images of Damnation and Salvation in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), Part II: 'The Host', 123-190; 136: '"Our miserable flesh" absorbed the "properties of the Redeemer's blessed flesh" and was regenerated and strengthened by this magic contact. A disturbing trauma, a blast of divinity, a draught of paradise surged through the communicant's veins.'

[15]The refusal to adore Christ in the host could have dangerous consequences. The Roman Catholic priest of Kuringen (Brabant) noted, for example, that a man in Münster in 1534 who refused to behold the elevated host was immediately struck blind, deaf, and dumb and could no longer eat, so that he had to be revived with a feather. J. Grauwels, *Dagboek van gebeurtenissen opgetekend door Christiaan Munters, 1529-1545* (Assen: Van Gorcum en Co. 1972) 20.

Menno Simons summarizes the true use of the Lord's Supper in two Latin marginalia in his earliest account of his ideas on the Lord's Supper in the 'Fundamentboek' of 1539/1540: 'Primo recordatio domini passionis' ['in the first place: the remembrance of the suffering of the Lord']; 'Secundo incitamentum dilectionis' ['in the second place: the exhortation to love'].[16] The remembrance is a spiritual activity on the part of the believer who is called to meditate upon the proclamation of the suffering and death of Christ, and the resultant reconciliation which has fallen to all people who believe in it. But the exhortation to love, unity, and peace in the church which ensue from this also requires human activity. As a result, attention is shifted from the objective, magical effect of the sacrament, to the active role of the receiver. In this way, Menno Simons makes the true use of the sacrament strongly dependent on the question of who may be called the true users of the Lord's Supper. His ideas on the Lord's Supper do not differ greatly from what the Sacramentarians taught, even if Menno Simons did develop his thoughts with great independence and without much evidence of dependence on others.[17] What sets him

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[16]The summary of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in *Fundament*, 84, is as follows: 'Thus this holy Lord's Supper is in the first place a commemoration of the death of Jesus Christ, because he suffered for us. And through his death are we reconciled, 1 Peter 2. In the second place, it is an exhortation to pure love within the church of God (. . .): if that bread from so many grains is still one bread, that wine from so many grapes still one wine, then we too of so many members are still one body.'

In the completely revised chapters on the Lord's Supper in his second edition of the *Fundament*, Menno Simons extensively develops yet a third characteristic into an admonition to sincere rebirth. See *Opera Omnia*, 29a; *Complete writings*, 150. Also see n.21 *infra*.

[17]H. W. Meihuizen suggests in his reissue of the *Fundament* (1539), 82, n. *a*, a possible affinity with Campanus, Rol, and Rothmann. They term the Paschal Lamb in Exodus 12 a 'Passover'; as a sign and not the substance of deliverance. (See also the same explanation in the second edition of the *Fundament* in *Opera Omnia*, 24b-25a; *Complete Writings*, 143.) This is an explanation which was in general use, however. We find no reference whatsoever to a deviant exegesis of the words of institution, as is the case in Hoen and in Hoffman, who depends on Hoen, (*est* means *significat*) or in Karlstadt (Jesus is referring to himself in *hoc* and not to bread and wine). In addition, there are few indications of similarities with other kindred spirits in the development of Menno Simons' explanation.

Christoph Bornhäuser, *Leben und Lehre Menno Simons*, 98, n. 143, noticed that, in relative terms, Menno Simons paid much less attention to the Lord's Supper than to baptism (*Fundament*, 77-104; *Opera Omnia*, 24-33 and 284-288; *Complete Writings*, 142-151 and 717-723). The explanation is simple: it is not necessary to spend a long time discussing opinions which are shared. His ideas about the Lord's Supper were not very different from those of the Reformed, the most important competitors. This is

apart from those like-minded with himself, however, is his answer to the question of the true users and servers.

At the end of the religious discussions between Luther and Zwingli in Marburg in 1529—a dispute which resulted in an unbridgeable gap between the Saxon and the South German/Swiss reformation, with all the attendant political consequences—Menno remarks that the scholars of this world had not addressed the most important question, namely the people for whom Christ had instituted his supper.[18] It is not the question of the nature of the presence of Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper which is of central importance to Menno Simons, but Paul's exhortation in 1 Corinthians 11:28-29: 'But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of *that* bread and drink of *that* cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body'. The necessity of self-examination is one of the most important characteristics of Anabaptism. Divergent assessments of the importance of this question meant that the Anabaptists started to distinguish themselves from the Sacramentarians and finally broke free of them.

Correct in terms of biblical theology, Menno Simons did not connect St Paul's exhortation to self-examination with the sincerity of the belief in the presence of Christ in the host, but with the body of Christ as an image of the church. Traditionally, worthy participation in the Lord's Supper was tied to the communicant's belief that the flesh of Christ was present in the form of the bread. Menno Simons related the question of worthy and unworthy communion to the quality of the love of the assembled congregation. Also where the subject of the true doctrine of the Lord's Supper was concerned, true penitence was constitutive in his eyes. The strong emphasis on self-examination preceding participation in the Lord's Supper, became the evangelical substitute for traditional confession, which was also meant to lead to knowledge of sins and contrition before communion. The Lord's Supper could only be celebrated in the congregation of true penitents, who formed the embodiment of the faith of Christ and freedom from sin. It was among the truly penitent that the efficacy

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the reason why the central theme of his substantial polemic against the Reformed, and his former colleague Gellius Faber in particular, was not the question of the true understanding of the Lord's Supper, but the question of the true users and servers.

[18] *Fundament*, 79. This reference to the conflict on the Lord's Supper between Luther and Zwingli has been reduced to an aside in the second edition of the *Fundament*: 'The arrogance and misunderstanding of some scholars will cause much blood.' (*Opera Omnia*, 24a; not in *Complete Writings*.)

of Christ as spiritual sacrament proved greatest, particularly in a moral respect. The body and blood of Christ had to be understood in the figurative sense, as being his love which was working in the "agreeable congregation" which shared the faith of Christ, where lust and desire were tempered and burdens and cares were shared.

These are admonitions couched in purely biblical phrases. After the Münster adventure, as leader of the institutionalizing Anabaptist movement, Menno Simons became increasingly concrete in the naming of various groups who were still 'worldly' in his eyes and who therefore had to examine themselves thoroughly before they were admitted to the table.[19] This naturally referred to the traditional believers in the first place—the great majority who remained loyal to the customs of the Roman Catholic church and who Menno Simons reproached for clinging to human teachings and injunctions, and for lacking the courage to place their trust in Christ alone. But the Anabaptists who had fallen under the spell of the Münsterite prophets and would not repent of the error of their ways were also exhorted to self-examination. In addition, he addressed himself in general to all Christians, although Menno certainly had mainly evangelical kindred spirits in mind, who did not dare to confess the Word of God openly out of love for transient things, who refused to share their possessions with their (persecuted) neighbor and who prided themselves on their own riches and wisdom instead of on their spiritual poverty. In short, all those who called themselves Christians but who led worldly lives and had not yet broken once and for all with their old lives and false religion.

The brotherly admonition only referred to the outward sins, however. If anger had been shown outwardly and was known to others, those who had transgressed God's commandment would not be admitted to the Lord's Supper. It is in connection with this question that Menno first names excommunication as a means of prevailing upon these sinners to show penitence and obedience to Christ.[20] Those who had committed inner sins, however, did not have to explain themselves before the congregation, but before God himself. By reason of logic, Menno Simons was forced to add a third characteristic of the true Lord's Supper to the first two. Besides the remembrance of the reconciling death of Christ and the

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[19]*Fundament*, 84 ff.

[20]*Fundament*, 90: 'then they must be cut off from the Word of God by excommunication, until they repent and prove themselves obedient to the gospel of Christ.'

exhortation to love, Christ had instituted the Lord's Supper to preserve the purity of God's church.[21] The true penitence of the communicants must be maintained at a high level by means of good discipline; the 'service' or 'duty of love' as the Anabaptists called it. The distinction between true and false Christians, between church and world, was not complete until baptism, but really commenced with the question about true admittance to the Lord's Supper. The baptism of true penitents alone was the logical consequence.

The celebrant.

The proper use and proper users of the Lord's Supper are only realized when there are sufficient good servers of the Lord's Supper. Menno Simons gradually came to the conclusion that these were difficult to find in the circles of the Roman Catholic clergy, unless the priests converted to Menno Simons' vision of the Lord's Supper as a feast of remembrance and feast of love for the truly penitent. As a consequence, he applied himself to the conversion of fellow clergymen especially in later years. If you have the shepherd, you also have the sheep. He paints the behavior of his colleagues in sharp colors, criticizing his former work as a priest at the same time in order to convince his own supporters of his abhorrence of his old life. The objections he voices are familiar. The priests withheld the wine from communicants and presented them with a visible and manipulable God in the form of a wafer. They thought they were able to mediate in salvation if they only celebrated mass with clean hands,[22] in rich robes, at the right speed, with the correct prayers and gestures at the right moments, and with accurately and clearly pronounced formulas, fearful as they were that the alchemist's trick of transubstantiation would fail to work otherwise.[23]

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[21]*Fundament*, 91. This third characteristic is developed further in the second edition of the *Fundament*, without excommunication being mentioned explicitly: *Opera Omnia*, 28a ('de oprechte wedergeboorte'); *Complete Writings*, 150-151 ('a true regeneration').

[22]*Fundament*, 120: 'Thus [by uttering 'hoc est enim corpus meum'] must he [i.e. Christ] come into hands unclean from whores or filthy sodomy.'

[23]See Camporesi, *The Fear of Hell*, 174: 'The bewilderment and uncertainty of many priests were more than justified. If even a few words of the sacred formula were changed (as in *Hoc est enim corpus meum*) the congregation might be made "invalid", or "valid but illicit", or even "doubtful". It was enough to say "*hic* [adverb] *est corpus meum*" to invalidate the consecration. But if the same "*hic*" was changed from "masculine to neuter, the consecration is valid, even ungrammatical". The novice had only to mispronounce a word to commit a mortal, or at best a venial sin.' See

The Roman clergy did not only have false ideas and conventions concerning the Lord's Supper, they were also morally perverted. Menno Simons accuses them of homosexuality and abuse of women and reproaches them above all for having made spiritual matters into merchandise.[24] Also reprehensible was the propagation of other papist abominations, such as legends, histories and fables, holy days, images, holy water, candles and palm fronds, divine offices, 'bollenoffer',[25] masses for the soul, purgatory, vigils, masses, matins, vespers, confession, pilgrimages, and satisfaction in the form of money.[26]

In contrast to the priests, Menno Simons has fewer errors in doctrine and practice with which to reproach the evangelical ministers. He admits that fornication, adultery, and abuse of the Lord's Supper are found among the evangelical ministers to a lesser degree than among the Roman clergy. In his later work—in which his main targets are the non-Anabaptist evangelicals—he devotes relatively little attention to the Lord's Supper because his opinions differ little from theirs where this tenet is concerned. There is one important exception, however. In the opinion of the outlawed priest from Witmarsum, the evangelical minsters led easy and safe lives, because they were less strict than the Anabaptists where the discipline of the Lord's Supper was concerned, partly as a concession to their protectors. Their congregations remained half church and half world, and constituted the visible demonstration of their adoptionist Christology, which taught that Christ was half God and half man. This was in sharp contrast to the Christology of Menno Simons, in which strong emphasis was given to the complete divinity and holiness of Christ incarnate. Only a church without worldly taints could be born out of the belief in this Christ who was free from sin—'the pure Word of God'.

The true servers of the Lord's Supper were not outwardly adorned with gorgeous liturgical robes, according to Menno Simons. Just like true communicants, they had to be inwardly

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Fundament, 88; 99-100, for Menno's comments on the traditional liturgical proceedings.

[24]*Fundament*, 87-88; 133 ff.

[25]'Bollenoffer' is usually regarded as a Frisianization: 'offertory of bread' (Frisian: bôle) as a reference to the sacrifice of the Mass. However, 'bôle' also has the meaning of 'devilish' in the Frisian language. See J. H. Halbertsma, *Letterkundige Naoogst* (Deventer: J. de Lange, 1840) 218-219. We find 'bollen offeren' in the second edition of the *Fundament*. This concept has been erroneously replaced by two words 'bullen, offers' in the *Opera Omnia*, probably due to its incomprehensibility. (*Opera Omnia*, 37b; *Complete Writings*, 165: 'Bulls [sic!] offerings'.)

[26]*Fundament*, 119-120.

adorned with a faithful, thankful heart, a pure conscience, and unfeigned, sincere love. They were faultless believers where both doctrine and living were concerned, in accordance with the biblical norms of the leadership.[27] Sent by God himself; called not by the State but by the irreproachable church and paid for their services, with the task of teaching the pure, unadulterated, unbroken Word of God,[28] to admonish, to punish, to administer the Lord's Supper and baptism, to exercise discipline and lead the congregation in accordance with Christian doctrine. In theory, the Anabaptist 'teachers' were not so different from the Reformed ministers; both regarded themselves more as tools of God than as his intermediaries or representatives. The practical difference, however, was that the Anabaptists aspired to greater independence from the State and advocated a more rigorous discipline. Life and doctrine were inseparable, also to the leaders of the church. The ministers had to prove the true doctrine by how they lived.[29]

In summary: In the eyes of Menno Simons, the true Lord's Supper was a spiritual communion with Christ in the assembly of true penitents, served by true penitents. The true church, as the *communio sanctorum* from the Apostle's Creed, was interpreted as the congregation of true penitents.[30] The preaching of true penitence retained its priority for Menno. The Lord's Supper, and baptism as well later on, derived their new evangelical meaning from this and their moral efficacy.[31] The theological question relevant to the presence of Christ in visible reality is answered by Menno Simons on the level of interpersonal relationships, and therefore of social ethics. The mercy of Christ was not to be sought in images or in the host, but in the strictly disciplined brotherly

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[27] *Fundament*, 88.

[28] *Fundament*, 119. The integral Bible text, as opposed to the 'broken Scriptures' in the Bible pericopes in the missal.

[29] *Fundament*, 127 ff.

[30] 'Penitence must come before the Sacraments and not the Sacraments before the penitence.' *Opera Omnia*, 285ab; *Complete Writings*, 718-719.

[31] Menno Simons also affirms the primacy of preaching true penitence when he describes his own path as a reformer: 'I openly started to teach the word of true penitence from the pulpit in the name of the Lord, to punish all sins and profanities in addition to all idolatries and false religion with the power of the Scriptures, and openly to witness to the true religion, including baptism and the Lord's Supper, according to the intention and fundament of Christ, to the extent that I had received grace from my God at that time.' (Text: W. Bergsma/S. Voolstra, *Uyt Babel ghevloden, in Jeruzalem ghetogen. Menno's verlichting, bekering en beroeping* (Doperse Stemmen 6) Amsterdam: Doopsgezinde Historische Kring, 1986) 40; *Opera Omnia*, 257b; *Complete Writings*, 671).

love which formed the outstanding distinguishing mark of the apostolic church.

A Sacramentarian priest?

Menno Simons says that in 1524, the first year of his vicarship in Pingjum, the thought suddenly struck him that the consecrated elements of the Lord's Supper were not the flesh and blood of Christ. He thought that the Devil was trying to destroy his faith. He confessed often, sighed and prayed but was unable to rid himself of the doubts.[32] Menno Simons provides us with no clear indications of the rumors, informants, or writings from which he derived his growing doubts about the miracle of the mass. It was exactly around 1524 that Karlstadt and his sympathizers expressed anti-Sacramentarian interpretations of the Lord's Supper, and they introduced radical reforms of the mass, as did Zwingli in Zürich. But why look abroad for explanations of Menno Simons' doubts about the miracle of the mass, when symbolic interpretations of the Lord's Supper—a radicalization of the spiritual inheritance of Wessel Gansfort—had been exported from the Netherlands to the centers of the Reformation in Saxony and Switzerland? We might think of such names as the lawyer Cornelis Hoen from the Hague, whose "avondmaalsbrief" (Epistle on the Lord's Supper) was given to Luther in 1521 by Hinne Rode, the rector of the Hiëronymous school in Utrecht. This writing received a warm reception from the Swiss reformers in 1523, in contrast to the response in Wittenberg. Oecolampadius recommended Zwingli to read it and the Zürich reformer subsequently ensured it was distributed widely by publishing it in 1525, under the title *Epistola Christiana*. Operating from his campaign headquarters in the low countries on the coast, the Devil whispered in the ears of many clergy far and wide that the presence of Christ in bread and wine should not be understood literally but figuratively. His activities did not pass unnoticed by the authorities. The Emperor Charles V had enacted an edict in 1524 forbidding the making, writing, printing, selling, and reading of new books containing teachings which were in conflict with the

[32]*Opera Omnia*, 256a; *Complete Writings*, 668.

Christian faith and church doctrine.[33] The arrest and sentencing of numerous suspects were the result.

The various expressions of Reformational leanings at the start of the third decade of the sixteenth century are generally grouped under the common denominator of 'Sacramentarianism' or 'Sacramentalism'.[34] The question is whether this is an adequate typology for the great diversity of critical voices during the Early Reformation in the Netherlands. In its strictest sense, Sacramentarianism is the designation of a religious movement in which the church's ideas about the physical presence of Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper were criticized and reinterpreted. However, because this concept is also used to describe other reformational feelings and has lost its clarity as a result, there are those who argue that the use of 'Sacramentarianism' to characterize the Early Reformation in the Netherlands should be dropped. After all, emphasizing the spiritual nature of the Lord's Supper does not necessarily lead directly to a rejection of traditional practice, to feigned participation in mass (nicodemism), or to abstinence, to say nothing of new practice. The intention of the spiritual interpretation was mostly to reinforce the effect of traditional sacramental practice.[35] From a historical point of view, the strict definition of the

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[33]Another important suspect writing was the *Oeconomica Christiana in rem Christianam instituens* (1522? 1523?) attributed to the Utrecht prior Hendrik van Bommel. It supplied the building materials for a writing in the Dutch language, which was published by the same author in 1523 under the title *Summa der godliker Schrifturen* (approx. 1526, supplemented by a second volume). This instruction book for the clergy contained reformational or Christian-Humanist ideas: Erasmus and Luther can still be found in brotherly union within its pages as propagandists for Christian freedom. Traditional ideas on the physical presence of Christ in the elements are not rejected, despite the accentuation of the spiritual understanding of the sacraments. Text edition, J. J. van Toorenenbergen, *Het oudste Nederlandsche verboden boek (1523). Oeconomica Christiana; Summa der Godliker Scrifturen* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1882). Also see the dissertation by J. Trapman, *De Summa der Godliker Scrifturen (1523)* (Leiden: Elve/Labor Vincit, 1978).

[34]G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation (Third Edition)* (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992) 95-96, uses the possibility offered by the English language to make a distinction between 'sacramentalists' (participants in conventicles where Reformational ideas were discussed, including the criticism of the *praesentia realis*) and 'sacramentarians' (all those who entertained unorthodox ideas about the sacrament of the altar, from a Roman Catholic or Lutheran point of view). Dutch sources provide no reason for such a distinction, however.

[35]This discussion was initiated by J. Trapman, *De Summa der godliker Scrifturen*, 118: 'It would appear less correct to name the first of those with Reformational leanings "Sacramentarians"'. C. Augustijn reached the same conclusion in his article 'Anabaptisme in de Nederlanden', *DB ns* 12-13 (1986-1987) 13-28; 'Anabaptism in the Netherlands: Another Look', *MQR* 62 (1988) 197-210. The 'Disputatie over de

concept 'Sacramentarian' in the sense just mentioned has the best qualifications. Luther used 'Sacramentarian' as a term of abuse for all those who propagated symbolic ideas of the Lord's Supper, such as Karlstadt and the so-called *Schwärmer*, and also extended it to Zwingli. Menno Simons appears to have been well-informed on the subject of this negative use of the concept 'Sacramentarian' by the Lutherans or 'Evangelicals' as he calls them.[36] He feels that he is being addressed as such, and thereby admits by implication that his ideas on the Lord's Supper were rightly identified as 'Sacramentarian'.

So can we call Menno Simons a Sacramentarian? In order to answer this question, we must define the content of this concept and then discover at which phase of Menno Simons' spiritual development this concept can be declared applicable. This is no simple task. All we can conclude from Menno's brief autobiography with its strong apologetic tendencies, is that from 1524 to 1536 he gradually developed from an average village clergyman into an evangelical preacher critical of the church (helped by Luther). He belonged to the multitude of priests with Reformational leanings who hoped for, or cautiously worked to achieve internal church reforms. In the Netherlands, the alternatives for the traditional mass were very strongly influenced by Sacramentarian, i.e. Zwinglian ideas. Menno fought a battle on two fronts after the fall of Münster. He attacked the Münsterites out of solidarity and affinity with the pioneering Anabaptist practitioners of true penitence—the supporters of Melchior Hoffman's purified religion. At the same time, he publicly attacked traditional conventions of baptism and the Lord's Supper—"from the pulpit"—although it is not clear whether he actually broke with

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sacramentariers' with contributions from C. Augustijn, A.C. Duke, S. Zijlstra and J. Trapman, *DB ns* 15 (1989) 121-148, showed that this was largely a question of definitions.

[36]In *Fundament*, 121-123, he reproaches the Lutherans (whom he calls 'Evangelicals' here) that they frequently cry grace, faith, love, spirit, and Christ, without showing any evidence of these and that they call the Anabaptists and Schwärmer Sacramentarians. In the second edition of 1558, Menno translates 'sacramentarios' [Sacramentarians] by 'sacramentsschenders' [violators of the sacraments]. *Opera Omnia*, 38a; *Complete Writings*, 167.

Sacramentarians in the most strict definition as rejecters of the *praesentia realis* were therefore also called 'Swingelschen' [Zwinglians] in order to distinguish them from the characterization of exponents of Reformational leanings, such as 'die van het Evangelie' [those of the Gospel], 'evangelischen' [Evangelicals] and 'lutherie' [Lutheranism], which more general qualifications could, however, also be applied to the Anabaptists ('rebaptized Lutherans', for example) and Zwinglians.

the traditional conventions of baptism and the Lord's Supper during this period. He was only able to sustain this fight for nine months. A new person was born during this period, and he left the Roman Catholic church at the end of January 1536 to end up in no-man's land for the time being.

Did Sacramentarian activities prepare the way for Menno's break with the church? We do not know whether Menno Simons took part in conventicles, as did so many other lower clergy. These were secret meetings where clergy and laity read the Bible and the writings of reformers together, and where the occasional traveling preacher spoke. Although these meetings did sometimes close with a shared meal, it is assumed that no alternative form of the Lord's Supper was celebrated during these gatherings.[37] The first time this happened was apparently in the meetings of the Anabaptists who broke away from the Roman Catholic church after 1533.[38] It was difficult to distinguish Sacramentarian centers from Anabaptist ones in the years between 1531 and 1534. Pro-reform ideas had not yet led to an alternative reformed convention in Sacramentarian circles. There was no need for an alternative sacramental practice until the introduction of the baptism of believers, which marked the break with the traditional church and necessitated the organization of a new church with an evangelical sacramental practice. Nevertheless, it has been established that the Sacramentarian groups were the first targets of the apocalyptic Anabaptist preachers of penitence, just as the apostle Paul addressed himself to the synagogues first. It was not until Melchior Hoffman and his pupils had convinced him that baptism too must be administered to the true penitents, that Menno Simons started making the baptism of believers and strict discipline the preconditions for admittance to the Lord's Supper. This narrow access made it impossible for him to function in the broader church.

Menno Simons is criticized for having hesitated so long before breaking with a form of the Lord's Supper about which he had had

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[37]J. G. de Hoop Scheffer, *Geschiedenis der Kerkhervorming in Nederland van haar ontstaan tot 1531* (Amsterdam: G. L. Funke, 1878) 512-517, provides a striking example of the meetings of Sacramentarians in Veere on the island of Walcheren in Zeeland from 1529 to 1531, the period in which the Anabaptist preachers became active. Religious gatherings were held in the home of a Frisian, Cornelis de Cuper, on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings, at which a traveling preacher 'who had the Holy Spirit' was capable of moving his hearers to tears. One of those present declared that he would rather lose his wife, home, and life than miss one of these meetings.

[38]See S. Zijlstra's contribution to the Sacramentarians debate, 'Anabaptisme en sacramentarisme', *DB ns* 15 (1989) 135-142; 140.

doubts since the start of his vicarship. This criticism bears witness to little understanding of the consequences of such a break with the traditional practice of religion. An event in Aachen on 19 February 1536, some weeks after Menno Simons had left the broad path and taken the narrow one, demonstrates the great hesitations on the part of serious Christians who rejected the traditional sacramental guarantees of everlasting salvation and the reactions to this on the part of the Roman Catholic clergy. A woman, a 'rebaptized Lutheran' according to the chronicler, was lying on her deathbed. Her neighbors sent for a priest to hear her confession and administer the Blessed Sacrament. The mortally ill woman refused this priestly service, however, so that the priest had to return to his church with 'Our Dear Lord' and nothing to show for his pains. Two hours later, undoubtedly due to growing fear for the salvation of her soul, the woman herself sent for the priest in order to confess and receive the Sacrament. The priest returned to her deathbed and heard her confession. Her words proved to have been feigned, however, because she was unable to swallow the host when the priest gave it to her. The wafer remained lying on her tongue as if it had been imprinted there. The woman died immediately afterwards. After some futile attempts had been made to remove the host from her tongue with a small instrument, the priests cut out her tongue and took it to the church with much honor. The tongue with the imprint of the host was displayed there behind glass and propagated as a new miracle by the priests and the cardinal, in order to reinforce the old faith and refute the new one.[39]

In our times, when religion is increasingly becoming reduced to the sphere of private life, it is essential to be aware of the 'totalitarian', the encompassing-all-reality nature of religion at the time of the Reformation. Social history has enabled us to rediscover the social and political dimensions of the Reformation and the position of the Anabaptists therein. But does this historical discipline also provide new insights into the religious mentality and motives of sixteenth-century believers? This discussion of Menno Simons' changing ideas on the Lord's Supper is the proof of how difficult it really is to do justice to these very aspects.[40]

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[39]Grauwels, *Dagboek van Christiaan Munters*, 37-38. Munters consistently calls the (Münsterite) Anabaptists 'rebaptized Lutherans'. He reports their provocations since 1533 and the measures taken against them in the nearby and distant regions of his parish in Kuringen, near Hasselt in Brabant.

[40]Stufford, *The World of Rural Dissenters*, 102: 'It is technically difficult to write about beliefs which were passionately held, dispassionately, yet still convey their original force.'

Chapter 4

The longing for perfection: The separation of the latter day saints

After the search for the historical and theological origins of Menno Simons' ideas on a renewed practice for penance and the Lord's Supper, the time has now come to turn our attention to another aspect of the care of souls, namely baptism. How and when was the Frisian village priest confronted with deviant ideas on baptism? By whom was he actually drawn into the Anabaptist movement? What did he think of the strongly apocalyptically determined aspiration to perfection, which was the message of the Anabaptist lay preachers or prophets? On which points and on the basis of which considerations did Menno Simons introduce a correction of the Anabaptist doctrine with which he came into contact after 1530?

Rumors of a new baptism

Doubts about the physical presence of Christ in bread and wine had led Menno Simons to study the Scriptures. This had brought the vicar of Pingjum the name of being an 'evangelical preacher', a reputation which he himself considered unjustified (in retrospect perhaps?). His cautious sympathy with the reformational cause had not affected his relationship with his immediate surroundings. On the contrary, his parishioners considered him a preacher of the Word of God and a man of irreproachable conduct. As Menno explains: 'I was sought after and wanted by everyone, for the world loved me and I the world.'[1]

This remark does not only give us some idea of Menno Simons as a person, it also indicates his spiritual situation. The criticism of the magical interpretations of the sacraments was common in the countries bordering the North Sea and reinforced rather than diminished the bond between believers and those entrusted with the care of their souls. While Menno Simons had still ascribed his doubts concerning the *presentia realis* to an anonymous devil, his doubts concerning the biblical legitimacy of infant baptism were not aroused by his own Bible study, but by a concrete person and a historical fact, namely the sentence passed by the Court of Friesland on Sikke Freerks on 20th March 1531.

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[1] *Opera Omnia*, 256a; *Complete Writings*, 668.

This devout tailor had admitted in Leeuwarden that on 11 December 1530 in the East Frisian town of Emden he had 'renewed' his baptism, and that he had therefore been rebaptized.[2] The rumor of the beheading of Freerks had also reached the vicar of Pingjum, and, according to Menno, he had heard about this execution before he ever heard anything in his life about several 'brothers'—kindred spirits of Melchior Hoffman's. If we take him at his word, we are forced to conclude that he was not aware, either verbally or in writing, of the practice of believers' baptism which had actually been commenced in Zürich six years previously. His fellow priest in Pingjum agreed with Menno Simons' discovery that no account of infant baptism was to be found in the Bible. He found in the Church Fathers that infant baptism had mainly come into fashion due to the idea that original sin could be washed away by this rite. In Menno's opinion, however, this idea was in conflict with the biblical testimony that it is Christ alone who takes away sins, and not the water. He then went on to study how the reformers in Wittenberg, Strasbourg, and Zürich continued to justify the practice of infant baptism. Luther, Bucer, and Bullinger proved to be divided in their arguments, thus providing one more reason for the vicar of Pingjum to feel cheated in the question of infant baptism. Nevertheless, his criticism of the church of which he was a priest was no obstruction to his pursuit of his career, or to his acceptance of a calling in 1533 to become a priest in Witmarsum, the village of his birth.[3]

How did Menno Simons come into contact with Anabaptist ideas and representatives of the Anabaptist movement? Despite the fact that he himself provides no clear information on this subject, we can draw one general conclusion: the Anabaptist movement in the Low Countries is the fruit of Melchior Hoffman's successful preaching in East Friesland. From April to June 1529 the furrier from Schwäbisch-Hall—together with Karlstadt, who had fallen out of favor with Luther—had been a guest of squire Ulrich van

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[2]The sentence is included in *DAN*, I, 4.

[3]The fact that priests were cattle farmers at the same time argues for placing the move from Pingjum to Witmarsum in the month of May. Menno Simons' indication of the time 'a little time thereafter [i.e. the execution of Sikke Freerks, March 1531]' should be loosely interpreted. When he had been living in Witmarsum for 'about a year', he was confronted at the end of 1533 with the resumption of rebaptism in Friesland by the disciples of Jan Matthijs. This exact date argues for placing the move from Pingjum to Witmarsum in spring 1533. His promotion brought him an increase in salary of between 60 and 100 Carolus gold florins and made him into one of the best paid pastors in Friesland. No wonder that Menno admits that he accepted the calling 'from love of profit and the desire for a greater reputation'.

Dornum, who was a strong Zwingli sympathizer.[4] They supported the general resistance of the East Frisian nobility and peasants against the Lutheran reformation, through their rejection of the Roman Catholic and Lutheran doctrines concerning the Lord's Supper. Many Dutch Sacramentarian ministers had found refuge in East Friesland, including Hinne Rode, who had taken Hoen's 'Avondmaalsbrief' [Epistle concerning the Lord's Supper] to Zwingli. At many places in the shire, the Lord's Supper was celebrated at a simple table, seated before the altar. The minister did not wear priestly robes, spoke the words of institution in the vernacular, and broke ordinary bread, which the participants themselves put into their mouths. The Zwinglians or Sacramentarians determined the nature of the reformational activities in this shire until 1530, and they prepared the way for the Anabaptist radicalization of reformation.

Inhabitants of East Friesland had allowed their children to go unbaptized even before 1530, although it is not known whether the baptism of believers occurred this soon.[5] Melchior Hoffman was the first to start this practice, after he had joined the Anabaptist movement in Strasbourg. He visited East Friesland for the second time from May to November 1530, and turned the shire into a bridgehead for the Anabaptist reformation in the Low Countries. During Hoffman's first visit, people attending worship in the Grote Kerk in Emden had chased the Lutheran minister Johann Tiemann (Soetemelk) from the pulpit, with cries of 'Slay that meat-eater!' and he narrowly escaped from the popular fury by taking refuge in the sacristy of the church. On his second visit, the Anabaptist lay preacher baptized 'citizens and peasants, lords and servants' in that same sacristy. Ulrich van Dornum, his protector, was also one of his approximately 300 rebaptized followers.[6]

The introduction of believers' baptism upset the ties with the East Frisian Sacramentarians—as would also prove to be the case elsewhere later on—and one of their ministers, Johann Oldeguil, requested the magistrate of Emden to expel Hoffman. When

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[4]For the following see Klaus Depperman, *Melchior Hoffman: Sociale Unruhen und apokalyptische Visionen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 133-138.

[5]*Ibidem*, 274-275.

[6]*Ibidem*, 275. His daughter Margareta was married to the Groningen nobleman Christoffer van Ewsum, squire of the manor of Jennelt, a 'Prinzipal-Mennist'. His second daughter Essa was married to Johann Gerdsma, an Anabaptist cloth merchant, and his youngest daughter Imele to a son of Jan van Batenburg's. Menno Simons' refuges in Groningen and East Friesland after his departure from the Roman Catholic church must very probably be sought in the jurisdictions of these squires.

Hoffman had to leave East Friesland in the autumn of 1530, he appointed Jan Volkerts Tripmaker as his deputy, and Volkerts it was who baptized Sikke Freerks. They both had to flee in December of that same year and Jan Volkerts travelled to Amsterdam, where Bartholomeus Boekbinder and Pieter de Houtzager were the first to be baptized by him. He baptized another fifty people there in the summer of 1531, together with Melchior Hoffman who was also visiting Amsterdam as a potential center for Anabaptist activities. Jan Volkerts Tripmaker was captured together with nine unfortunate companions and executed on 5 December 1531.

Sikke Freerks had gone to Leeuwarden from Emden, and he probably spread the ideas of Melchior Hoffman in an existing conventicle of like-minded Sacramentarians in the Frisian capital, but without practising rebaptism as yet. The brothers Obbe and Dirk Philips may have been members of this circle, although it was not until January 1534 that they were baptized by the missionaries of Jan Matthijs of Haarlem, Hoffman's successor in the Netherlands, Hoffman having been imprisoned in Strasbourg in the interim. Being among the very first leaders of the Melchiorite Anabaptist movement, Obbe and Dirk appointed Menno Simons a fellow elder at the beginning of 1537. No wonder that Menno Simons preferred to keep silent about the names of all these links in the chain of the Anabaptist apostolic succession. By doing so, he succeeded in his objective of camouflaging their shared spiritual descent from Melchior Hoffman, 'the father of Dutch Anabaptism'.

The first wave of missionary activities carried out by Sikke Freerks and Jan Volkerts in the Low Countries ended in a bloodbath, and Hoffman subsequently ordered the suspension of baptism for two years, until the end of 1533, in his dismay at his disciples' longing for martyrdom. Now that baptism no longer constituted a distinction between Sacramentarians and Anabaptists, the followers of Melchior Hoffman succeeded in doing missionary work without much danger during the period when baptism was suspended. This success was assisted by a visit to the Netherlands by Hoffman himself in 1532, and the distribution of numerous of his writings which were published there.[7] The local magistrates' opposition to the centralist religious politics of the Habsburgs meant that no effective action was taken against the heretics, and

[7]Such as *Die ordonnantie Godts* (1530), *Verclaringhe van den gevangenen ende vrien wil* (before 1532), *Van der . . . magestadt gottes* (1532), *Een waraftyghe tuchenisse . . . tho den Ro. IX. Ca.* (1532), *Die . . . sendebrief . . . to den Romeren* (1533).

that almost no executions took place during those two years. This changed after the period of suspended baptism had elapsed, and Jan Matthijs of Haarlem had taken over the prophet's mantle from Melchior Hoffman.

This second wave of Anabaptist activities led by Jan Matthijs did not go unremarked by Menno Simons, who writes of it in dramatic terms as if he were describing a breach of the dykes in Friesland. After he had been living in Witmarsum for a year, as he himself puts it: 'there was an invasion of a multitude preaching rebaptism'. But he claims not to know who they were or where they came from. Here we have Menno keeping silent about the truth, at the very least, because does he not pride himself on having debated with the Münsterite propagandists on two occasions, once in secret and once in public?[8] He must have known that Peter Houtzager had already performed a rebaptism in the neighboring village of Arum fourteen days before Christmas 1533, and therefore very soon after Jan Matthijs had resumed baptizing on All Saints' Day without Hoffman's consent.[9] Many other inhabitants of Friesland had also been rebaptized, spurred on by the threatening apocalyptic preaching of the followers of Jan Matthijs. Rebaptism was necessary to escape the ominous Judgement of God and those baptized had to swear to break completely with the Roman Catholic church. The prophecy that the time of the assembly of one hundred and forty-four thousand redeemed had come (Revelation 7:14; 14:1) led numerous men and women to leave their houses, goods, and children behind to find a 'safe haven' in besieged Münster.

Nor can the priest of Witmarsum have remained ignorant of the fact that Bartholomeus Boekbinder and Willem Kuiper[10], two other apostles of Jan Matthijs who were filled with the same Pentecostal spirit, had caused turmoil and discord in the Sacramentarian conventicle in Leeuwarden, with the Münsterite message that God would very soon extirpate all shedders of blood, all tyrants, and all the ungodly. Obbe Philips and Hans Scheerder were baptized by

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[8]*Fundament*, 199.

[9]See *DAN*, I, 24. The person in question was Hilgundt Ghelen, who was arrested on 24 March 1534 near Genemuiden, where 27 ships had gathered for the voyage to Münster. She confesses in February 1535 that she had been rebaptized by Peter Houtzager in her house in Arum in Friesland, fourteen days before Christmas 1533. She continues to adhere to all the errors of which she is accused but revokes her rebaptism.

[10]A.F. Mellink (*DAN*, I, 8, n.2) assumes that the Dirk Kuiper named by Obbe Philips must actually have been Willem Kuiper.

them, were appointed elders, and were immediately sent out of the town to baptize in the country. Eight days later, the aforesaid Peter Houtzager also arrived in the Frisian capital, where those he baptized included Dirk Philips, Obbe's brother. They were both to become Menno Simons' closest associates, after they had ordained him an elder at the beginning of 1537. Bartholomeus and Willem left for Münster immediately after their missionary activities in Menno's country, and stayed in Münster from the fifth to the seventh of January 1534, baptising Bernd Rothmann, the so-called 'Wassenberg ministers' Roll, Klopriss, Vinne, and Van Stralen and the rich merchant Bernd Knipperdolling. They then returned to Friesland in the middle of January. Together with Peter, they both took part in the demonstration of the 'Sword Walkers' or 'Sword Bearers' in Amsterdam on 22 March 1534, walking through the streets with drawn swords exhorting the inhabitants to penitence. They were executed in Haarlem on 26 March and Obbe Philips travelled to Haarlem with a number of fellow believers to pay the last respects to the three men who had baptized and ordained them. They proved to have been mutilated beyond recognition.[11]

Menno Simons lived in the northwest coastal region of Friesland which, for reasons still unknown, proved particularly receptive to the apocalyptically motivated practice of rebaptism. Numerous villages around Witmarsum had inhabitants who had been rebaptized. An imperial edict of 3 February 1535 threatened non-churchgoers with punishment if they did not attend confession and Communion before Easter.[12] The execution of a 'brother or confederate' from nearby Wommels, the confiscation of his possessions, the setting fire to his house, and the unmerciful treatment of his noble wife and their seven children had raised tempers on all sides. Between five and six hundred Anabaptists had gathered to the south of Franeker in desperation, to await the deliverance promised them at Easter (28 March 1535) by the emissaries from Münster. They successfully repulsed an attack by two hundred soldiers; and two hundred men, women and children then managed to capture the Oldeklooster (the Old Cloister) near Bolsward by guile, using no violence whatsoever. They pretended that they were being pursued by the Anabaptists and were simply allowed inside. Once inside, they allowed the monks the choice of staying or leaving, desecrated images and the altar sacrament, and fortified the building. The stadholder Schenk von Tautenburg was

[11]See the account by Obbe Philips in *BRN*, VII, 129 ff. (*DAN*, I, 6 ff.)
[12]*DAN*, I, 20; 25 (The decree dated 9 March 1535).

only able to retake the monastery after a week-long siege. One of those killed was Menno Simons' brother[13], while those executed later included a man from Menno Simons' former parish of Pingjum and a woman from Witmarsum. Full of understanding and compassion, Menno Simons writes later of them as people whose only misdeed had been to defend their faith with their fists when it was under violent attack, something which the infant baptizers, too, had thought very normal before then.[14]

Menno Simons' first contacts with the Anabaptists

It remains unclear how and when Menno Simons joined the Anabaptist movement. Menno Simons himself says nothing whatsoever on the subject. It appears that he was baptized by Obbe Philips and accepted into the Anabaptist congregation,[15] but Obbe Philips does not mention this fact, only saying that he ordained Menno Simons as an elder in the city of Groningen. This must have happened at the start of 1537, after Menno Simons had been 'exercising the Word of the Lord in silence for a year with reading

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[13]His name is unknown. The brother of Menno Simons who was hanged on the spot after the taking of the Oldeklooster (according to Nicolai, *BRN*, VII, 461) (his name is missing from the later sentences in Leeuwarden) must not be confused with P(I)eter Simons of Tirns (near Sneek), one of the twelve elders in Münster, appointed by Jan van Leiden, steward of the household of his lovely consort Divara, the widow of Jan Matthijs. Marion Kobelt-Groch, *Aufsässige Töchter Gottes: Frauen im Bauernkrieg und in den Täuferbewegungen* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 1993) 97, does not only wrongly identify Peter Simons of Tirns with Menno's brother, but also couples this Münsterite leader to Hille Feicken who, in the role of Judith, tried in vain to kill 'Holofernes', the Bishop of Münster. J.W. de Hoop Scheffer, 'Eenige opmerkingen en mededeelingen betreffende Menno Simons VIII', *DB* 34 (1894) 11, n.1, challenges this identification by pointing out that Peter Simons of Tirns was in Münster at the time of the siege of the Oldeklooster: 'He had nothing in common with Menno other than that his father was called Simons, as was Menno's father and hundreds, even thousands of others.'

[14]*Opera Omnia*, 320b; *Complete Writings*, 775.

[15]According to Nicolai's 'Inlassingen in Bullinger, "Teghens de Wederdoopers"' (1569), in *BRN*, VII, 362, 'after which Obbe [after the Anabaptist riot in Groningen around 2 February 1535, and not 'in April', which was when the siege of the Oldeklooster occurred, as Nicolai remarks *in margine*], as they themselves admit, rebaptized Menno Simons and admitted him to his Anabaptist congregation'. (Also see *DAN*, I, 113.) Obbe Philips baptized eight people at 't Zand around 2 February 1535 (*DAN*, I, 128; cf. 122), where a large crowd of those baptized were gathered around the prophet Herman Schoenmaker at the farm called 'De Arke Noachs' [Noah's Ark].

and writing'.[16] The baptism is often wrongly identified with the ordination. Like many others in his immediate surroundings, Menno must have been affected by the apocalyptical preaching of penitence by Jan Matthijs' emissaries. Their call to true penance and proclamation of the imminent advent of a new world of sanctification and justice which had to be awaited without the use of force made a great and lasting impression on him and he continued to consider this message to be the true import of the Anabaptist faith. He rejected and opposed the Münsterite realization of this same message, however, as soon as its excesses became visible in his own surroundings.

What we have difficulty in understanding is the great respect which Menno Simons and his fellow believers originally cherished for 'prophets' of this kind. Their penitence and piety, their charismatic powers of persuasion and authority, must have made an indelible impression on innumerable pious believers who endeavored to bring about reforms, but who at the same time experienced physically the consequences of the violent resistance of those opposed to the renewal of life and doctrine. The tension caused by the exaggerated expectations and increasing repression drove them to flock together like refugees, their senses sharpened to receive a sign of where the breakthrough in the impasse could be expected. Was it in the bare Groningen countryside, at a farmhouse like a Noah's Ark washed up on the flat sea coast, where a prophet was calling believers to penance? Was it in a Frisian monastery purified of idolatry, which had fallen into their hands as if by divine miracle and which was offering safety and protection to the hunted throng? Or was it in the faraway Westphalian cathedral city, where a Messianic king was on the verge of riding out to cleanse the world of all injustice and tyranny? It was indeed time for the true saints to rule the world instead of bloodthirsty tyrants and godless clergy. They had to equip 'boergen' [strongholds] in various cities, such as Groningen, Deventer, and Amsterdam,

[16]V.P., 'Successio Anabaptistica', *BRN*, VII, 45: 'Obbe also laid the office of teacher on some, as he had learned, and made bishops like Dirick Philipssoon, his brother, from the Dam [=Appingedam], David Jorissoon from Delft, Menno Symonssoon from Groningen. Together with these he tried around the year 36 to plant the peaceful teachings of the Anabaptists in all places, and to follow the prophets of his Apostles, who had sent him.' Obbe and Menno are portrayed here as the new leaders who had to pass on the original message of Jan Matthijs and his associates, viz. the gospel of peace and unity, that a new world would be resurrected in sanctification and justification, that God would take away the tyrants and the enemies of the faith, and that they would preach the Word of God in love without sword or knife or shedding of blood.

where they could await the coming of the king of Münster,[17] preparing the way for the coming of the Lord.

Is it possible to link Menno Simons so closely to these prophetic and apocalyptic beginnings of the Anabaptist movement in the Low Countries? There are a number of clues which make the temptation great to risk a reconstruction of a circle of Anabaptists with whom Menno Simons became associated. De Hoop Scheffer suggests that after Menno Simons left the Roman Catholic church in January 1536, he reverted to the circle of advocates of believers' baptism which had formed around a Münsterite minister in Witmarsum. A brother of Menno's had also belonged to this circle, but had been killed during the taking of the Oldeklooster. Geertruid and Griet, two sisters from his parish, were also members. Menno married Geertruid, most probably before he was ordained elder at the start of 1537. She was probably a beguine, a member of a Netherlands lay sisterhood, not bound by vows,[18] so that he followed Luther who also married a nun. Celibacy and spiritual leadership had become irreconcilable according to good reformational thinking, and so following good apostolic custom, Menno had to be the husband of a wife. Geertruid's sister Griet, who was married to Rein Edes,[19] had been baptized at Witmarsum by the otherwise unknown Münsterite Douwe Schoenmaker from nearby Sexbierum.[20] When she later came to repent of this baptism, she asked her brother-in-law Menno Simons to baptize her again, a request which was refused by him and by his fellow elder Leenaart Bouwens later on.[21]

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[17]A.F. Mellink, *De wederdopers in de noordelijke Nederlanden* (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1954) 266.

[18]In 1549 in Leeuwarden, sentence was passed on Elisabeth Dirks, a 'bagijnke' from the convent of Tienge (East Friesland) who was taken for Menno's wife. It can be deduced from this that he married a beguine. *BRN*, II, 91.

[19]A letter dated 1 September 1557 from Menno Simons to his brother-in-law has survived. Menno's wife is already dead by then. He complains in this letter about the division which has arisen in the congregations about the question of church discipline, and tells him that he needs sixty thalers a year to support his family. *Opera Omnia*, 392ab; *Complete Writings*, 1055-1056.

[20]*DAN*, 1, 77-78. Anne Douwesdochter was accused in 1547 that she had had in her home 'great conversations' with 'Douwe Scoenmaecker van Sexbierum' in February 1535, before he perished at the reduction of the Oldeclooster in early April 1535. Alenson writes: 'Also there was a woman called Reyns Eydes, said by her friends to come from Witmarsum, wanting to be baptized by this same Münsterite teacher, called Douwe Schoenmaecker, and this was done.' *BRN*, VII, 236.

[21]*BRN*, VII, 236. De Hoop Scheffer wrongly identifies Douwe Schoenmaker with Douwe Kempes, who is named on the same page.

However the case may have been—and much will probably remain unclear—Menno Simons had close connections with a circle of Anabaptists in Witmarsum, which had evolved after 1534 from the preaching of a Münsterite minister, and these people were so dear to Menno that he married one of them. His possible father-in-law, Herman Hoyer, was probably also a member of this Anabaptist circle. On 24 October 1536, the death penalty was demanded against the said Herman Hoyer because he had sheltered the fugitive priest from Witmarsum, and he must therefore have done so during the months after Menno's departure from the Roman Catholic church, when he was quietly studying and writing in Groningen. The sentence was never carried out, however.[22] It was not until the excesses of the Anabaptist preaching of penitence became visible that Menno Simons turned against these prophets and opposed the central role of Münster in the preparation of the coming of Christ. He dissociated himself from Melchior Hoffman and Jan Matthijs, remarking, 'I am no Elijah or Enoch'. He declared that he neither saw faces nor was spoken to by angels.[23] Nor did he claim to be a third David, unlike Jan van Leiden and David Joris, who called up doubts as to whether a forerunner of Christ's or Christ himself was meant. Against these developments, he ranges his own interpretation of the Anabaptist faith, based exclusively on 'the explicit, literally written Word of God as truly understood in the spirit'. Excommunication comes into operation on the basis of this doctrine, and this inevitably had to lead to the development of a division between his followers and those who continued to sympathize with the Münsterite ideas. How painfully this process developed is illustrated by Menno Simons' continuing compassion for 'our dear brothers' who had been misled by false prophets on some points, through ignorance. In this context, we should think mainly in terms of the Münsterite doctrine of the visible rule of the Messianic pretender Jan van Leiden, and the use of violence to make an immediate start with the purification of the world in anticipation of the Last Judgement which was at hand.[24]

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[22]Vos, *Menno Simons*, 5-6. *DAN*, I, 50.

[23]In his early *Die Oorsake* (1539), A33v-34r. (*Opera Omnia*, 448b; *Complete Writings*, 448.) The apocalyptic visions of Jost and Barbara Rebstock (a husband and wife from Strasbourg) published by Melchior Hoffman, were known throughout the Low Countries. See *TAE*, II, no. 617, p. 393.

[24]*Fundament*, 139; 202; 171; 174-175; 198.

The ultimate purification

The apocalyptic craving for purity was the most important motive for the Anabaptist reformation in the Low Countries.[25] The consciousness of living at the end of time was common during the Reformation and Luther himself knew the inclination to concern himself with calculations of the end of time and the interpretation of astrological phenomena. He was convinced, however, that the actual Day of Judgment—as it had taken place in the death and resurrection of Christ—was already behind us, and this conviction served to weaken considerably the Wittenberg reformer's apocalyptic urge to make calculations. Furthermore, he rejected any human involvement in the imminent coming to pass of the Day of Judgement.[26] His reticence concerning apocalypticism and prognostication was reinforced by the actions of non-academic lay preachers, such as his former follower Melchior Hoffman, for example, who derived their prophetic authority from the determined apocalyptic interpretation of the Bible.

Menno Simons, too, lived his entire life in the expectation that the final judgment of the world was at hand. This apocalyptical consciousness reinforced yet again the fear already present in all serious believers of having to appear before God's seat of judgment at the end of their personal lives. Apocalypticism and eschatology presume and strengthen each other, as well as sometimes being difficult to distinguish from each other, also in the writings of

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[25]It is the great merit of Walter Klaassen that he drew our attention to apocalypticism as one of the constituting elements of the Anabaptist reformation and as an indispensable key to its interpretation. See, for example, his article 'Eschatological Themes in Early Dutch Anabaptism', in Irvin B. Horst, ed., *The Dutch Dissenters. A Critical Companion to their History and Ideas* (Leiden: Brill, 1986) 15-31.

Social historians sometimes create the impression that apocalypticism is merely an articulation of social criticism or anticlericalism, instead of seeing that social criticism may be a possible expression of a fundamentally religious, apocalyptical understanding of life. For the allocation of a secondary significance to apocalypticism, see for example Ralf Klötzer, *Die Täuferherrschaft von Münster: Stadreformation und Welterneuerung* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 1992) 207: 'The incorporation of apocalypticism into the theology of the Anabaptist rulers of Münster is a consequence of its anticlerical foundations.' In this way, apocalypticism is only functional in the service of a process of reform which is proceeding according to sociological laws.

[26]See Ole Modalski, 'Luther über die Letzte Dinge', in Helmar Junghans, ed., *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546: Festgabe zu seinem 500. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983) 331-345. No explanation of Paul's words 'that the saints shall judge the world' (1Cor. 6:2) is therefore to be found in the work of Luther. *Ibidem*, 343.

Menno Simons. Menno's whole life was determined by them to a significant degree. He had experienced in his own surroundings the signs of the wrath of God which threatened temporal existence—'hunger, illness, drought, wars, fire, robbery, imprisonment and extirpation',[27] and this must have greatly increased receptivity to the preaching of penance by the Münsterite prophets.[28] But it was much more threatening to have been robbed of God's Word, thus depriving believers not only of their temporal lives, but also of the promise of everlasting life. This was the reason why he interpreted the rediscovery of the Gospel and the ensuing reformation as a positive sign of the end of time.[29] While the pressure of time and governmental repression meant that the Münsterites did not shrink from using violence to cleanse church and society of godlessness if necessary, Menno Simons, on the other hand, wanted to use only the Bible and his own writings as a double-edged sword to achieve this objective. Their means differed, but their objective was the same; the cleansing of church and society, from high to low, inwardly and outwardly, of a non-biblical practice of religion and morality in preparation for the imminent Second Coming of Christ. Menno Simons had set himself the impossible task of purifying Roman Catholic Christianity—'the

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[27]Friesland suffered seven floods between 1502 and 1516. There was famine in 1522, the English sweating fever in 1529 and the plague raged in 1532. All these disasters helped to convince Menno Simons and his contemporaries that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent. See S. Blaupot ten Cate, *Geschiedenis der Doopsgezinden in Friesland* (Leeuwarden: W. Eekhof, 1839) 36-37.

[28]*Opera Omnia*, 438b; *Complete Writings*, 294.

[29]Among other things, we find the following example of Menno's apocalyptic understanding of time in his *Fundament* (1539/1540) 23: 'Moses, that loyal servant of God, was not permitted to enter the Promised Land because he had once doubted God's Word. And so there is really no help for this unbelieving folk, which everywhere despises the gospel of Jesus Christ and hears not the voice of the trumpet, which has sounded so long with such great power.' (It is also a good example of how Menno constantly places the Old Testament calls for radical obedience at the heart of his own concept of faith in all his explanations, only now it is applied to the obedience owing to 'the simple command of Christ'.)

For his interpretation of the positive and negative signs of the end of time in the time of true penitence, see for example, *Die Oorsake*, Aa47v and *Rechte Christelycke Geloof* (1541) K8. The fact that he deals first with the faith of Noah in connection with the Flood in this latter work, may also indicate an apocalyptical context. (E2 ff.).

In 1558 he is still convinced of the immediate Second Coming of Christ: 'There can be no other reading of the Bible than that this is the last anniversary, the last proclamation of the Holy Gospel, the last invitation to the wedding feast of the Lamb, which has yet to be celebrated, preached and sanctified before the great and terrible Day of the Lord.' *Opera Omnia*, 6a; *Complete Witings*, 109.

whore of Babylon'—and arraying her again as a virginal Bride to receive her Bridegroom.

The apocalyptically-motivated urge for purification gives rise to several questions. What was the actual purification envisaged by the Anabaptists? A social revolution, a reformation of the church, personal or collective freedom from sin, inward or also outward? Or are all these questions inextricably entwined because they constitute the articulation of a religious reality encompassing all these aspects? How could so much confusion arise over the question of whether the use of violence was permitted or not during that purification process? And finally, what was the role of baptism in this cleansing operation?

What the Anabaptists unmistakeably had in mind at the beginning, and as a matter of principle, was a reformation and purification of reality as a whole. They were concerned with a personal inner conversion (true penitence) and outward renewal (regeneration). This outward renewal was interpreted as a renunciation of the false religion and as a turning to the true religion. In the case of the Anabaptists, this true evangelical religion was characterized mainly by a new individual and collective morality implying social criticism.[30] And because religion was a political matter in those days, the Anabaptist purification movement encountered restrictions defined by the authorities. The degree to which the Anabaptists could carry out their complete purification and the fields in which they could do so depended on the flexibility and tolerance of the authorities. The Anabaptists were greatly frustrated in their original ambitions by severe and bloody repression, but at the same time they were confirmed in their conviction that they, as the persecuted, were the true latter-day saints.

Some reacted passively and sometimes consciously sought martyrdom. Others tried to bring about an Anabaptist city reformation in other cities, something which had been achieved in Münster solely by the preaching of penance. In fact, apocalyptical overstrain could even cause this to take the form of an armed coup. The rejection of violence and its espousal both share one and the same apocalyptically-motivated origin. It was only after the fiasco of Münster that nonviolence gradually developed into a principle

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[30]In the work of Menno Simons we find various admonitions on the basis of biblical examples to care well for employees, not to become mixed up in usury, trade, the law, and to avoid conspicuous finery. See particularly his *Rechte christelycke geloof* (1541). (*Opera Omnia*, 73f.; *Complete Writings*, 321f., both texts based upon the second edition, 1556.)

for that part of the Melchiorite Anabaptist movement in the Netherlands led by Menno Simons and his followers, which wanted to dissociate itself from the Münsterites.

This is the reason why Menno only mentions the abandonment of violence in combination with his rejection of the Münsterites. As far as he is concerned, nonviolence in principle is not a central theme of overriding importance in his theology. This is shown, for example, by his ambivalent attitude to the authorities. Menno's rejection of government violence is also determined by the situation; ultimately he only denies the authorities the right to use judicial violence in questions of religion. In other words, the authorities must not allow the Roman Catholic church to turn them into the implementor of its pursuit of heretics. Menno continually points to the clergy as the real instigators of the persecution of those who advocated reform, and constantly exhorts the authorities to form an independent judgement on the true and the false church. The means to this end recommended by Menno are public debates on religion in which the Anabaptists can defend their views.

If Menno had succeeded in finding a local or regional authority which could have implemented a reformation in the Anabaptist style—and the chance of this was quite real in East Friesland for some time—then this would not have been in conflict with his theology. The totalitarian nature of religion at that time and the conviction that the authorities were responsible for religion determined that neither Menno nor his contemporaries were able to conceive of a fundamental separation of church and state. Two causes, an external one and an internal one, prevented the development of a national Anabaptist reformation and church. The Habsburg repression did not give the required latitude to lower authorities who sympathized with the Anabaptists, while the severe demands made on the moral standard of the purified church by the Anabaptists with their strict discipline made it impossible for the government to enfold all its subjects within such a church without spot or wrinkle. This was something which no government whatsoever could accept, responsible as it was for the unity and peace within society.

Defenseless and defending saints

Condensed in time and space, the disturbance near 't Zand in Groningen provides a good illustration at microlevel of the core

and ambivalence of the question of violence.[31] Jan van Leiden had also sent an emissary to ask the inhabitants of Groningen to travel to besieged Münster, which was the city where they would be saved at the coming Day of Judgement. Two people from Groningen who had seen the situation in Münster for themselves returned with positive news at the start of 1535. At the beginning of February—the waterways and roads were frozen—between 900 and 1,000 people[32] gathered in and around the farm of the rich farmer Eppe Peters, close to the stronghold of the Omptedas, the squires of the village, joyful at the good news which the two commissioners had brought back from Münster. The crowd which had flocked there included the aforementioned Herman Schoenmaker who proclaimed himself an Old Testament prophet, even God the Father himself. For days on end he lay in bed, stripped to the waist, constantly drinking beer and calling out as one possessed to 'Slay monks, priests, all rulers in all the world, especially our rulers. Repent, for your deliverance is at hand.' He tried to acquire authority and ordered that one of his pupils who was imprisoned be freed, which was successfully achieved.

The expectation that time was short was growing and approximately 300 of those present were rebaptized, believing that this sign would save them at the coming Day of Judgment. Everyone threw themselves to the ground, weeping and singing. The healing of Eppe Peters' lame foot was a failure, so that the host became totally disillusioned and departed. Another Anabaptist set himself up as the Son of God and Herman Schoenmaker as God the Father allowed him to share abundantly in the beer which constituted the Holy Spirit, thus forming a remarkable trinity. However, to cut an exciting story short, they came to a bad end. Cornelis int Kerkhof, the Son of God, was exposed and driven off by Antonis Kistemaker, a legate from Münster, while Herman Schoenmaker fell into the hands of the troops of Karel van Gelder, the stadholder of Groningen, who had been warned of the situation. The enraged Schoenmaker did nevertheless manage to drive 40 soldiers before him with a pitchfork at first, a deed which several Anabaptists not unjustifiably regarded as a divine miracle. The 'Messiah of 't Zandt' died in prison, incessantly screaming the message from Bernd Rothmann's 'Van de wrake' [On revenge], that

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[31]For Nicolai's account of the disturbance see *DAN*, I, 112-122.

[32]Many of those present had already been baptized by Claes van Alkmaar, for example, the emissary of Jan van Leiden. (*DAN*, I, 122). Obbe Philips, by whom Menno Simons was ordained in early 1537, baptized eight at this place; Herman Schoenmaker 300 on one night.

monks, priests and rulers should be extirpated. The crowd broke up. Seventy armed men subsequently tried in vain to capture a monastery at Warffum, in order to attempt from there to come to the help of the besieged Oldeklooster at the beginning of April 1535.

The course of the disturbance gives a good impression of the overstrain which the expectations of the end of time and the persecution by church and authorities had caused in many people. But what light do these events now throw on the question of violence? At some point during the disturbance everyone was instructed to lay down everything which could serve as a weapon, in addition to luxurious clothing and jewellery. Was it not true that God would fight for these defenseless and simple souls and extirpate the godless? The same was the case in Amsterdam.[33] This city, too, was a center of Anabaptist activity and was therefore another target for the propaganda of Jan van Leiden. Here, too, the Anabaptists were to gather and wait passively until the King of Münster appeared before the walls to deliver them. Approximately a week after the trouble at 't Zand seven men and five women cast off their weapons, clothes, and jewellery in a house in the Zoutsteeg, on the orders of the tailor Hendrik Hendriks. Naked and defenseless as children they were to await their deliverance. The truth had to be naked. They ran naked through half the city in the wintry cold, howling horribly: 'Woe, woe, the vengeance of God, the vengeance of God'. Most of them were sentenced and executed.

The question of violence was not one of principle but of strategy, which is the reason why it was also the subject of great disagreement before the failed attack on Amsterdam had materialized. At what point did the apocalyptically-motivated passive resignation and defenselessness have to change into militant purification? After the Anabaptists in 't Zand had laid down their weapons and adornments, and had driven out the Devil with prayer, the Father and the Son suddenly ordered that everyone should arm themselves with rifles, weapons, and battle garments. The prayer had been heard, the time to pray had passed and the time to fight and conquer had come.

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[33]See A.F. Mellink, *Amsterdam en de wederdopers in de zestiende eeuw* (Nijmegen: Sun, 1978) 46-48. A similar ecstatic eruption, focused on Claes Jans van Hazerswoude, took place in Poelsdijk around 10 March 1536, and therefore long after the fall of Münster. Mellink, *Wederdopers*, 218-219.

Internal and external Kingdom

Although the apocalyptic drive to purify religion was something Menno Simons continued to have in common with the Melchiorites and the Münsterites, he did feel called upon to correct the excesses of the Melchiorite movement. In opposition to the expectation of the appearance of a Messianic third David, whether Jan van Leiden, David Joris, or someone else, he emphasized that Christ had already come and that no other earthly Messiah was to be expected before the Second Coming of Christ. He denounced the kingship of Jan van Leiden, the polygamy and the use of the sword to establish an external Kingdom of Christ. It goes without saying that he also rejected the murdering and robbery of small bands under the leadership of Jan van Batenburg, who continued their acts of vengeance for some time after the fall of Münster.[34] In worldly matters he called for obedience to the Emperor, kings, lords, and all authorities. The only sword with which the reformation could be continued, was the double-edged blade of the preaching of the Word of God. This led to the foundation of a spiritual, inner, and invisible Kingdom; namely a community of saints with the faith of Christ which was not congruous with the world. Christ with his word and spirit ruled in the hearts and consciences of reborn people.[35] It was a 'gathering of penitents', a community of love which had to be maintained by constant self-examination and discipline between the members, and which had to await submissively the Second Coming of Christ.[36]

Menno Simons' emphasis on the inner and spiritual Kingdom—his reaction to Münster—should not be misunderstood as a flight from the world, or as spiritualism. It is no invisible Kingdom in the sense that all that really mattered was inner purity of heart and conscience, without this belief manifesting itself in an outward form. On the contrary, the church as 'a true and proper entity', recognizable by its doctrine, faith, behavior, sacraments, discipline, etc., would be created in the hearts and consciences of reborn believers as a consequence of the rule of Christ, the preaching of the pure Word of God.

Menno had to fight a battle on two fronts, against Jan van Leiden on the one hand and David Joris on the other. The stained-glass

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[34]*Fundament*, 174-177.

[35]*Fundament*, 35.

[36]For Menno's vision of the true church, see for example *Opera Omnia*, 295b ff.; *Complete Writings*, 734 ff.

artist from Delft, who had been ordained an elder by Obbe Philips in the same year that Menno was ordained, reduced belief after Münster to a radical, inner purification which should extinguish even the *fomes peccati*, the tinder which continually caused humankind to flare up in sin. The method of achieving this was a complete confession before the congregation or part of it, which would not only arouse repentance for outward sins (as was the case in Menno's ideas concerning true confession), but which also brought to light surreptitious feelings and desires, mainly of a sexual nature. The spiritual person could become perfect by publicly confessing the secret stimuli which led to sin. The Law, God's demanding justice which revealed the sin, lost its accusatory nature.[37] Nakedness no longer brought feelings of shame, so that sexual congress without sinful feelings of lust was possible as a consequence. By stressing this urge for inner perfection as the core of faith, the necessity of external forms such as the sacraments and discipline disappeared. The evangelical teachings became a secret, individualistic, and spiritual doctrine of sanctification without outward manifestation, thus making it easier to avoid the danger of persecution.

Menno Simons recognized a formidable enemy of his own program of purification in this extreme spiritualism, in this temptation to nicodemism ('feigning to the world'), and in the 'devilish confession, bringing no shame with it'.[38] It endangered his endeavors to build the Melchiorite movement on the foundation of the apostolic teachings; the perfection to which Menno aspired to had been moderated to the absence of public sins. But obedience to Christ's teachings and ordinances was also a precondition to obtaining the promise of forgiveness and everlasting life. The most important of these ordinances was baptism, which marked the assembly of true penitents and completed their separation from the godless world. All of this was in preparation for the Day of Judgement, for which Menno Simons did not fix a day or year, however, in contrast to the followers of Melchior Hoffman.

Baptism as an end and a new beginning

In his early writing *Verclaringhe des christelycken doopsels* (1539), Menno Simons describes the traditional manner in which he himself, as a priest, had baptized many infants. Before the child

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[37]See Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman*, 315-324.

[38]*Fundament*, 198.

was baptized, he had explained to those present that the child lived under the wrath of God, but would be reborn through the sacrament of baptism. He then performed the rite, explaining each separate part of the ceremony. He blew over the child just as Christ had conferred the Holy Ghost on the apostles; exorcized the devil by an invocation; blessed the child, stroked its eyes with saliva and laid salt on its tongue; made the sign of the cross over the infant and baptized it as it was held above the baptismal font by its godparents. He then followed this by anointing and the laying on of hands.[39] How poorly did his later Anabaptist baptismal convention contrast with this. There were no unbiblical sacramental attributes and only some water was poured over the head of the person being baptized while the trinitarian baptismal formula was uttered.[40] This much more powerful baptism rescinded the idolatrous infant baptism.[41] Adults sometimes even received new names on their rebaptism, to replace the names they had received on their baptism as infants.[42] Menno advised parents of as yet unbaptized infants to choose a name themselves.[43]

Before Menno heard of the 'renewal of baptism' through the execution of Sikke Freerks, he must have been aware of the criticism of infant baptism which was being heard loudly everywhere as early as the start of the third decade of the sixteenth century. Even around 1521 doubts were already being expressed in the circle of the Wittenberg reformers concerning Augustine's theological motivation of infant baptism. In addition, Erasmus' notes on Christ's command to baptize in Matthew 28:19, cleared the way for the idea that education should precede baptism. The reformation of the practice of infant baptism, therefore, often encountered just as many objections of a political kind as of a

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[39]*Christelycke doop* (1539) E7r. (*Opera Omnia*, 411a; *Complete Writings*, 252.)

[40]The manner in which Jannes van Rommershoven performed a baptism—wearing a paper stole and maniple—shows that priestly airs were still assumed sometimes. Grauwels, *Dagboek van Christiaan Munters*, 84.

[41]In Antwerp in February 1535 the child of an Anabaptist mother was baptized against the mother's will. When the newly-baptized child was brought home from church by the neighbors the mother rejected the baptism and rebaptized the infant. Grauwels, *Dagboek van Christiaan Munters*, 28-29.

[42]W. Bax, *Het Protestantisme in het bisdom Luik en vooral te Maastricht 1505-1557* ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1937) 98, n. 4: 'I learned that people being baptized sometimes received new names when they were rebaptized, It is said of Lysken Ketelbueter 'that she was to be rebaptized and that she would have a different name'. [. . .] And we read that the baker Jan Baviers (Bauers) was called Floris after his rebaptism.'

[43]Bax, *Luik en Maastricht*, 398.

theological nature.[44] Menno had known before 1529 that infant and adult baptism were being practiced alongside each other in the German city of Nördlingen in 1525. The children were attached to the congregation there by means of a laying on of hands and prayer.[45] In the Low Countries, too, the point of view was held as early as 1532 that it was better to baptize someone who realized the significance of the promise not to lead a worldly life. Nevertheless, this criticism had not led to the practice of believers' baptism[46] and Melchior Hoffman was the first to initiate this.

Hoffman had come into contact with the Anabaptists in Strasbourg, but we do not know who baptized him or even if he actually was rebaptized. We find the first account of his Anabaptist theology as it reached the Low Countries in his *Ordonnantie Godts* in 1530, an explanation of Christ's commandment to baptize and teach (Matthew 28:18-20). Menno Simons must have been well acquainted with his writings and he certainly derived his doctrine of incarnation from Hoffman. He devoted the major part of his works to the defense of Christ's complete freedom from sin, because this constituted the foundation of his church without spot or wrinkle,[47] but he perforce shows little evidence of a direct dependence on Hoffman where other characteristic tenets are concerned, including baptism. The Anabaptist ideas on the doctrine of incarnation, baptism, and the Second Coming of Christ, which Menno came into contact with after 1530, subsequent to his 'Exodus from Popery', were reformulated by him in a supremely effective

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[44]Friesen, *History and Renewal*, 25-26.

[45]*Fundament*, 33. Menno knew the writing by Diepold Gerlacher (alias Billicanus), *Renovatio Ecclesiae Nordlingiacensis et ratio omnibus reddita de quorundam institutione, per Diaconos ibidem. Anno 1525.* Text: *Die Evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des 16. Jahrhunderts*, Bd. XII: *Bayern*, II. Teil: *Schwaben*, VIII: *Freie Reichsstadt Nördlingen* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1963) 289-306. The passage in question from the chapter 'De baptismo' on p. 296 reads as follows: 'Tingimus pueros; tingimus profectioris aetatis. Non arcemus ab ecclesia, qui pueros ad tingendum non offerunt, sed tantum manuum impositione et deprecatione ecclesiae Christo mediatori et servatori nostro commendant. Nullam aetatem praecepit baptismo Christus, sed neque ullam vetuit.' [Translation: We baptize infants and persons of adult age. We do not turn those away from the church who do not bring their children to be baptized, but only to be recommended to Christ, our mediator and Savior, through the laying on of hands and the prayer of the church. Christ neither commanded nor forbade baptism at a certain time.] Oecolampadius sympathized with this double practice of baptism and Hubmaier in Waldshut administered it. Parents who were still unable to take leave of traditional baptism, the 'weak ones', were allowed to offer their infants for baptism.

[46]*De Summa der godliker scrifturen* (1523), 118-126.

[47]Voolstra, *Het Woord is vlees geworden*, 47-50.

manner within the context of the teachings of Christ and apostolic practice.

Because obedience is the most important element of Menno Simon's understanding of religion, he considers the believers' baptism in the first place to be a sign of obedience to Christ's command to baptize (Matthew 28:18-20 and Mark 16:16). He puts this ordinance first, as does Hoffman, and then gives an explanation of a number of key texts from the letters in the New Testament, as a summary of the apostolic doctrine concerning baptism.[48] Finally, he uses Sebastian Franck's *Chronica* as his main source in an attempt to prove that adult baptism was also apostolic practice in the early church.

Just as was the case in his teachings on the Lord's Supper, Menno shifts his attention in his teachings on baptism from the sacrament itself to the effect it has on the believer. Without true penitence and faith, water will be of no help to the person being baptized. Believers are not changed by baptism but in baptism.[49] Not by the magical effect of the water, but by obedience to the Word of God and therefore also to Christ's command to baptize. Where Menno Simons is concerned, therefore, the emphasis on belief as the internal precondition for true baptism does not lead to a spiritual undervaluation of the act of baptism. Without true baptism, and thus without the true penitent belief and the New Testament believers' baptism, there is no promise of the forgiveness of sins and therefore no one can inherit heaven, is Menno's sharp formulation.[50]

In this way, the spiritualists were kept at a safe distance from Menno's church without external spot or wrinkle. But the

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[48]See his summarized recapitulation in *Christelycke doop* (1539), M5r (*Opera Omnia*, 431a; *Complete Writings*, 283): Acts 2:38; 8:37; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 19:5; Romans 6:3; Colossians 2:12; Galatians 3:27; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Titus 3:5 and 1 Peter 3:21. He studies fewer texts in depth, viz. Romans 6; Colossians 2; Titus 3 and 1 Peter 3 in his *Fundament* (1539/1540).

Although his *Christelycke doop* appeared in print a year earlier than the *Fundament*, there are clear indications that it was written after (at least the chapter about baptism in) the *Fundament* had been completed. The *Christelycke doop*, A3r, refers to 'our first writings on baptism'. On M5r-v Menno answers the criticism directed at him on account of his rejection of Luther's ideas on baptism, such as these are also examined in the *Fundament*. It is likely that the *Christelycke doop*, the *Fundament*, and possibly other lost writings on the subject of baptism were circulated in manuscript first before they appeared in print.

[49]*Christelycke doop*, D1v: 'Fideles non mundantur per baptismum, sed in baptismo.' (*Opera Omnia*, 406a; not in *Complete Writings*, 244.)

[50]*Fundament*, 48; 59 and 63.

Münsterite Anabaptists were also spurned. They interpreted baptism one-sidedly as an apocalyptic sign, the sign of Tau from the Revelation of John, with which the 144,000 redeemed were marked at a decisive moment, awaiting the Second Coming of Christ. When this decisive moment had passed in 1535 with the fall of the New Jerusalem, the Münsterite Anabaptists started to replace baptism with a laying on of hands.[51] It is no coincidence that this strict apocalyptical interpretation of baptism as the sign of Tau is only found on a few occasions in the works of Menno. He wished to dissociate himself from this idea, too, by reserving the sign of Tau for his own followers alone, who were characterized by exclusive obedience to the letter of the New Testament.[52]

Being just as aware as the Münsterites of how short time was, Menno Simons maintained unabridged the call to true penitence, but corrected some aspects of the belief on which true baptism must be based. He concentrated belief on exclusive obedience to Christ and the apostolic teachings, thus rejecting the Münsterite ideas on the violent revenge on godlessness, the visible Kingdom, polygamy, and the sharing of goods, most of which were founded on the Old Testament. Free of these errors, the original true penitents could truthfully describe themselves as reborn; believers

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[51]See *DAN*, V, 275. Hendrik of Maastricht admitted in April of 1536 that he had not been baptized, but had entered into the 'covenant' by the laying on of hands. As late as 1538 people were still being admitted to the covenant by means of the laying on of hands (*DAN*, II, 29-30).

It was rumored that children were circumcised in Münster instead of being baptized, in primitive obedience to the letter of the Old Testament. Grauwels, *Dagboek van Christiaan Munters*, 28; 'Item binnen Munster non baptizabant sed tum circumcidebant pueros.' Adults, too, allowed themselves to be circumcised at danger to their lives and offered sacrifices in Jewish fashion. Mellink, *Wederdopers*, 257,

[52]For the significance of this sign in early Anabaptism see Werner O. Packull, 'The Sign of Tau: The Changing Conception of the Seal of God's Elect in Early Anabaptist Thought', *MQR* 61/4 (1987) 363-347. Menno uses this biblical image to describe those born again, which is to say, his own supporters who aspire to complete equality of form with Christ and are termed 'spiritual', in contrast to the Münsterites, who also grounded their faith 'literally' i.e. in the Old Testament. For Menno Simons 'spirit' means 'the letter of the New Testament'. *Opera Omnia*, 183a; 282b (response to Gellius Faber's accusation that Anabaptists wanted to conquer the world with the sign of Tau) 636a; *Complete Writings*, 59; 686; 16.

The Melchiorite Anabaptists were admitted to the covenant, became 'fellows of the covenant', through baptism as the sign of Tau. In this way, the non-violent belonged to the 'covenant of Obbe Philips' (*DAN*, II, 38), and the militants were called 'fellows of the covenant of the sword' (*DAN*, V, 286). Those baptized had to swear under oath that they would completely shun the Roman Catholic church (this is the original meaning of shunning the 'world') and to give up drunkenness and defamation (*DAN*, V, 20).

who 'breathed Christ' in faith, doctrine, and life, yearning to meet their Lord.

Index

Aachen 81
Abortion 42
Abrahamsz de Haan, Galenus 8, 27, 31
Absolution 42
Adam Pastor 10, 46, 65
Adriaan Pieterz. 68
Adultery 41, 75
Algemene Doopsgezinde Societeit 25
Amsterdam 2, 19, 22, 50, 51, 85, 87, 89, 97
Anabaptists 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 26, 27, 31, 32, 33, 37, 38, 42, 44, 47, 50, 51, 53, 55, 56, 57, 62, 63, 64, 68, 69, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 94, 95, 96, 97, 100, 101, 102, 103
  Swiss 19
Anne Douwesdochter 90
Anti-Christ 12, 42
Anticlericalism 54-57, 92
Antwerp 100
Apostles' Creed 76
Appingedam 7, 88
'De Arke Noachs' 88, 89
Arnold, Gottfried 20, 23, 24, 26
Arum 86
Assumption 61
Augustijn, C. 78
St. Augustine 68, 100
van Aytta, Viglius 31

Baptism 42, 48, 69, 82-88, 99-103
Baptists 33
Batenburg see Jan van Batenburg
Baviers (Bauers), Jan 100
Beguine 90
Bender, Harold S. 16
Bern 19
Bible 40, 42, 44, 45, 49, 50, 52, 54, 55, 57, 64, 66, 67, 69, 76, 80, 82, 83, 92, 93
  Exodus 12---71
  Psalm 25---48
  Wisdom of Solomon---45
  Ecclesiastes---45
  Matthew 3:2---47
  Matthew ch. 18---9
  Matthew 28:19---100
  Matthew 28:18-20---101, 102
  Mark 16:16---102
  John 6---68
  John 6:63--65
  Acts 2:38---102
  Acts 8:37---102
  Acts 10:48---102
  Acts 16:15, 33---102
  Acts 19:5---102
  Romans 6---102
  Romans 6:3---102
  Colossians 2---102
  Colossians 2:12---102
  Galatians 3:27---102
  I Cor. 11:28-29--72
  I Cor. 12:13---102
  II Cor. 3:6---65
  Ephesians 5---9
  I Peter 2--71
  Titus 3---102
  Titus 3:5---102
  I Peter 3---102
  I Peter 3:21---102
  Revelation---102
  Revelation ch. 13---11
Billicanus see Gerlacher, Diepold
van Blois, Petrus 41
Boekbinder, Bartolomeus 7, 85, 86, 87
Bolsward 87
van Bommel, Hendrik 78
Bornhäuser, Christoph 71
Bouwens, Lenaart 9, 90
Brabant 70, 81
van Braght, T. J. 26
Brandt, Gerard 2-15, 26
Brunk, Gerald R. 2
Bucer, Martin 37, 83
Bullinger, Heinrich 83
Bunderius, Joannes 11
Burghart, Jacobus 24, 25, 28

Calvin, John 13, 20, 21, 26, 37
Calvinism, Calvinists 2, 3, 10, 31, 33, 62, 63
Campanus 71
Carel van Ghendt 8
ten Cate, S. Blauwpot 27
Catholics 2, 5, 11-12, 15, 26, 30, 32, 37, 40, 46, 51, 54, 55, 56, 59, 62, 63, 65, 66, 70, 73, 74, 78, 80, 81, 84, 86, 90, 91, 93, 95, 103
Celibacy 90
Charles V, Emperor 77

Christ 38, 42, 44, 45, 47, 48, 52, 53, 54, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 82, 83, 91, 92, 93, 94, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103
Christmas 61
Christoffer van Ewsum 84
Christology 21, 55, 66, 75
Church Fathers 64, 65, 83
Claes Jans van Hazerswoude 97
Claes van Alkmaar 96
Collegiants 20
Cologne (Germany) 51
Communion 39, 41, 42, 47, 48, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 67-81, 87
Confession 39, 40, 44, 69, 99
Coornhert, D. V. 63
Cornelis de Cuper 80
Cornelis int Kerkhof 96
Cramer, A. M. 26-28
Cramer, Samuel 8, 30

Death 38, 42-43, 51, 61, 70
Deknatel, Joannes 22, 23
Delft 88, 90, 98
Denck, Hans 29, 30
Deventer 61, 89
Devil 12, 38, 41, 70, 77, 82, 97, 99
Devotion see Modern Devotion
Dirk Philips 6,7, 31, 51, 85, 87, 89
Discipline, church 4-5,8-10, 20, 21
Divara 88
Docetism 66
Dominicans 11
Donatism 69
Doopsgezind 8, 18-33
Duke, Alastair 3
Duncanus, Martinus 11

Easter 39, 47, 61, 87
Ecclesiology 38
Edes, Rein 90
Elijah 91
Elisabeth Dirks 90
Emden 8, 13, 83, 84, 85
England 13
Enlightenment 45
Enoch 91
Eppe Peters 96
Erasmus, Desiderius 44, 47, 50, 64, 65, 66, 78, 100
d'Escobar, Andreas 41
Eucharist see Communion

Faber, Gellius 15, 16, 18, 72, 103
Feicken, Hille 88
The Fall 51
Flemish 8, 10, 16
  Old Flemish 21, 22
Food 41
Fornication 41, 75
Franck, Sebastian 26, 63, 65, 67, 102
Franeker 87
Freerks, Sikke 82, 83, 85, 100
van Freiburg, Johannes 41
Frisia, Friesland, Frisians 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, 16, 31, 33, 56, 59, 61, 69, 75, 80, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 89, 90, 93, 95
  Young Frisians 19

Gansfort, Wessel 77
Genemuiden 86
Gerdsma, Johann 84
Gerlacher, Diepold 101
Germans, High, see High Germans
Germany 4, 57
Gerrits, Lubbert 21
Ghelen, Hilgundt 86
van Ghendt, Carel see Carel van Ghendt
Ghent 11
Goertz, Hans-Jürgen 55
Grace 2, 39, 40, 47, 48, 51, 53, 57, 66, 69, 70, 76, 79
Groningen 7, 61, 84, 88, 89, 91, 95, 96

Haarlem 7, 50, 85, 86, 87
Habsburgs 3, 31, 85, 95
vander Haghen, Govaert 65
The Hague, Netherlands 77
Halbertsma, J. H. 27
Hamburg 25
Harlingen 4
Hasselt, Brabant 81
Heaven 39, 42
Hell 38, 39, 42, 51, 70
Hendrik of Masstricht 103
Hendriks, Hendrik 97
Hendriks, Pieter 21, 22
Hiëronymous school, Utrecht 77
High Germans 9
Hoekstra Bzn, S. 31
Hoen, Cornelis 71, 77, 84
Hoffman, Melchior 4, 12, 14, 15, 18, 50, 51, 71, 79, 80, 83, 84, 85, 86, 91, 92, 99, 101, 102
  see also Melchiorism

Holland see North Holland
Holofernes 88
Holy Spirit 12
Homosexuality 41, 75
de Hooghe, Romeyn 23, 24
Hoorn 2
Horsch, John 16
Horst, Irvin B. 2
Hosius, Stanislaus 4
de Houtzager, Pieter 7, 85, 86, 87
Hoyer, Herman 91
Hubmaier, Balthasar 101
Huiskoopers 16
Humanism 50, 65
  biblical 3, 4, 63, 66, 78
Hussites 64
Hut, Hans 50

Iconoclasm 62
Idolatry 62, 76, 89
Immanence 62
Incest 41
Indulgences 39, 40, 69
Infanticide 42

Jan van Batenburg 4, 84, 98
Jan van Leiden 20, 50, 88, 91, 95, 96, 97, 98
Jan Matthijsz 6, 7, 14, 50, 83, 85, 86, 88, 89, 91
Jannes van Rommershoven 100
Jennelt 84
John the Baptist 38
Johanniterklooster 7
Joris, David 6, 54, 63, 89, 91, 98
Judith 88

Karel van Gelder 96
von Karlstadt, Andreas Bodenstein 51, 71, 77, 79, 83
Keller, Ludwig 27, 29
Kempes, Douwe 90
Ketelbueter, Lysken 100
Kimswerd 4
Kistemaker, Antonis 96
Klaassen, Walter 2, 92
Klopriss 87
Knipperdolling, Bernd 87
Koblet-Groch, Marion 88
Krahn, Cornelius 2, 33
Kühler, W. J. 32
Kuiper, Dirk 86
de Kuiper, Willem 7, 86
Kuringen, Brabant 70, 81

Lamists 22
von Langenstein, Heinrich 41
a Lasco, Joannes 13
Last Judgement 38-40, 92-99
Latin 61, 65, 69, 71
Laughing 28
Lavater, Johann Caspar 24
Law and Gospel 51-54
Leeuwarden 4, 7, 51, 83, 85, 86, 88, 90
van Leiden, Jan see Jan van Leiden
Lemmeken (High German elder) 9
Limbo 39
van Limborch, Phillippus 26
Lollards 64
Lord's Supper see Communion
Low German 9, 65
Luther, Martin 12, 20, 21, 26, 37, 40, 44, 46-48, 50, 52, 53, 54, 66, 68, 69, 72, 77, 78, 79, 83, 90, 92, 102
Lutherans 5, 62, 78, 79, 81, 84

Maas river 16
Maastricht 103
Maatschoen, Gerardus 19, 20
Marburg 72
Marriage 41
Martyrs 39
Martyrs Mirror 26
Mary (mother of Jesus) 14, 38
Matthijsz, Jan see Jan Matthijsz
Meihuizen, H. W. 33, 71
Melanchthon 53
Melchiorism, Melchiorites 14, 21, 85, 94, 97, 98, 99, 103
Mellink, A. F. 4,7
Menno Simons
  appearance 16-18
  as Catholic priest 37-58
  as a pastor 40-45
  Christelycke doop 102
  in Dutch historiography 2-34
  Fundamentboek 20, 67, 71, 72, 74, 75, 79, 93, 102
  Geertruid (Menno's wife) 90
  'Meditation on Psalm 25' 48-49
  monument at Witmarsum 29, 30
  Opera Omnia 4, 21, 26, 67
  Verclaringhe des christelycken doopsels 99
Mennonite World Conference 32

Mennonites
  Netherlands, 17th century 2
  Netherlands, confessional 18-21
  Netherlands, conservative 21-22
  Netherlands, pietist 22-24
Middelburg 26
Middle Ages 12
Mikron, Martin 5, 13, 15, 16
Modern Devotion 37, 45, 64
Monophysitism 66
Mosheim 26
Münster, Münsterites 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 14, 15, 19, 20, 26, 27, 33, 37, 50, 51, 62, 70, 73, 79, 81, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 102, 103
Munters, Christiaan 81
Müntzer, Thomas 3, 4, 11
Mysticism 37

Neo-Platonism 63, 64, 65
Netherlands
  Kingdom of the Netherlands 26, 28
  Republic of the Seven United Provinces 2
Neulen, Jan 16
Nicodemism 78, 99
Nider, Johannes 41
Nieuwkoop 2
Nikolai, Gerardus 17
Nissen, P. J. A. 11
Nördlingen, Germany 68, 100
North Holland 9

Obbe Philips 4, 5, 6, 7, 51, 63, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 96, 98, 103
Oecolampadius, Joannes 77, 101
Oldeguil, Johann 84
Oldeklooster 87, 88, 90, 97
Ompteda 96

St. Paul 65, 72, 80, 92
de Peñafort, Raymundus 41
Penance 39-57
Pentecost 61
Peter Simons 88
Petri, Cunerus 11
Pettegree, Andrew 3
Philips, Obbe see Obbe Philips
Philips, Dirk see Dirk Philips
Pietists 20, 22-24, 25, 45, 49, 65
Pingjum 4, 40, 43, 46, 59, 61, 66, 77, 82, 83, 88
Plantinus, J. 26
Poelsdijk 97
Polygamy 98, 103
Pope 50
Prayer 44-45, 58
Predestination 2
Protestants 20, 21, 28, 29, 37
Purgatory 39, 40, 43, 50

Rationalists, rationalism 23, 25, 57, 59, 60
Rebstock, Jost and Barbara 91
Reformation 2,3
Reformed 62, 63, 71, 76
  church, Netherlands 2, 3, 5, 8, 13-15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 30, 33
  doctrine 2
Remonstrants 2, 3, 4, 5, 26
Renicxzoon see Tiaert Renicxzoon
Resurrection 42
Reynertszoon see Tiaert Renicxzoon
Rhetoricians 18
de Ries, Hans 21, 26, 31
Rode, Hinne 77, 84
Roermond 16
Rol, Henrik 71, 87
Romanesque 58
Rome 60
Rothmann, Bernard 4, 50, 71, 87, 96
Rotterdam 19, 66

Sacramentarian 47, 61, 62, 67, 68, 71, 72, 77-80, 84-86
Sacraments 12, 22, 39, 40, 44, 46, 47, 49, 53, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 73, 76, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 87, 98, 99, 100, 102
Saints 38, 46
Salvation 38-39
Sappemeer 21
Sattler, Michael 27
Saxony 77
Schagen, Martin 8, 27
Scheerder, Hans 86
Scheffer, J. G. de Hoop 10, 88, 90
Schenk von Tautenburg 87
Schijn, Herman 19, 20, 26
Schoenmaker, Douwe 90
Schoenmaker, Hendrik 7
Schoenmaker, Herman 88, 96
Schoolmeester, Valerius 10

Schwäbisch-Hall 83
Schwenckfeld, Caspar 61
Sexbierum 90
Sexuality 41
van Sichem, Christoffel 16, 17
Sin 39, 44, 49
Sneek 88
Snekensis see Tiardus
Social Democrats 31
Socinianism 19
Sodomy 41
Spanish 3
Spiritualists, spiritualism 8, 24, 32, 33, 50, 63, 98, 99, 102
Spufford, Margaret 60
Starck 26
Stayer, James M. 55
van Stralen 87
Strasbourg 83, 84, 85, 91, 101
Sunday 61
'Sword Bearers' 87
Switzerland 27, 77
Synod of Dordrecht 2

Tauler, Johannes 37
Theologia Deutsch 37
Thomas, Keith 60
Thyaert (Frisian Anabaptist) 4
Tiaert Renicxzoon 4
Tiardus Snekensis see Thyaert
van Tielt, Herman 15
Tienge 90
Tiemann (Soetemelk), Johann 84
Timmerman, Franz 51
Timmerman, Harmen 6
Tirns 88
Tracy, James D. 3
Transcendence 62, 63, 67
Transsubstantiation 46, 61, 62, 74
Tripmaker, Jan Volkerts 85
Twente 26
Twisck, Pieter Jans 6

Ulrich van Dornum 83-84
Utrecht 77, 78

Veere 80
Veluanus, Joannes Anastasius 53
Vinne 87
Visser, M. S. E. 33
Vissersweert 16
Vos, Karel 16, 31
Vulgate 47, 65

Walcheren 80
Waldensians 4, 23, 26, 27, 37
Waldshut 101
Walraven, Simon 11
Warfum 7, 97
Wassenberg ministers 87
Waterlanders 9, 20, 32
Williams, G. H. 78
Wismar 13, 16
Witmarsum 4, 29, 30, 40, 53, 75, 83, 86, 87, 88, 90, 91
Wittenberg, 46, 47, 77, 83, 92, 100
Woltjer, J. J. 3
Wommels 87
World War II 32
Wormer 11

Ypeij 26

't Zand 7, 88, 95, 97
Zeeland 80
van der Zijpp, N. 32
von Zinzendorf, Nicolaus Ludwig 22
Zonists 18, 19, 20, 21, 22
Zürich 24, 62, 77, 83
Zwickau 4
Zwingli, Ulrich 50, 72, 77, 79, 84
Zwinglians 5, 62, 63, 79, 84
Zwolle 61
Zylis (High German elder) 9

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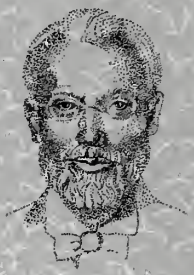

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